The Brian Auten Files (Updated)

Review of the Tradecraft Review of the 2016 Intelligence Community Assessment on Russian Election Interference, released 2025

Compiled by Jeff Pierson

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Preface

I focus on Brian J. Auten not only because I knew him personally, or rather, thought I did, but because of the role he played at the very center of some of the most politically consequential intelligence failures in modern American history. As a senior FBI intelligence analyst, he directly shaped how evidence was evaluated and how narratives were constructed in investigations that influenced the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. His actions contributed to the misuse of surveillance powers, the suppression of legitimate information, and the erosion of public trust in institutions that were supposed to serve truth and justice. The consequences have been felt not only in courtrooms and headlines, but in the culture of division, cynicism, and instability that now marks much of our national life.

Auten represents a rare, traceable nexus between several of the most politically discredited intelligence operations of our time. While high-ranking political appointees often hide behind layers of deniability, Auten acted as a gatekeeper who controlled what intelligence reached public view, law enforcement action, or judicial scrutiny. He operated without election, confirmation, or public accountability, yet his influence was decisive. He could have stopped, corrected, or exposed failures that led to immense political, legal, and cultural upheaval. In my view, his choices contributed, directly or indirectly, to national and global harm, including unjust suffering, erosion of trust, and the manipulation of democracy itself.

My greatest disappointments in life have not been circumstances or missed opportunities, but people, specifically those I trusted, loved, and prayed for. Perhaps the failure is mine—in expecting too much, in confusing talent with virtue, or in assuming that shared faith ensured shared character. I am certain that I have failed to meet the expectations of many. And while I do not fully understand how my own development, or Brian Auten's actions, have affected me psychologically or spiritually, I feel the weight of it. The betrayal is not only institutional or political; it is personal. It reaches into places I once considered secure: my faith, my ideals, my friendships. I find myself wondering not only how someone like Auten could fall, but how close I might have come under different circumstances. That uncertainty is unsettling. But it also affirms something vital—that truth, integrity, and repentance must be pursued deliberately, not assumed by proximity, credentials, or good intentions. If he can fall, anyone can. And if we are honest, the line between failure and faithfulness often runs through the heart of each of us.

If people like us, people of faith, conviction, and sincere intent, are capable of such failures, what hope does the Church have? What hope does the nation have? The answer is not in pretending these failures do not matter, or in rationalizing them for the sake of

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politics or comfort. The answer is in confession, in correction, and in truth. Our hope is not in our strength, but in our willingness to be humbled. Not in the righteousness we claim, but in the grace we seek. The Church, like the Republic, is only as strong as the integrity of those who serve it, and both suffer when we trade holiness or honor for influence or security. But history and Scripture tell us that renewal does not begin in power; it begins in repentance.

Our hope is that even now, in a time of great disillusionment, God has not forsaken truth. He still raises up people who will speak honestly, act justly, and walk humbly, not because they are flawless, but because they fear the consequences of silence. If Auten's story is a warning, let ours be a response. Let us be the ones who grieve failure without excusing it, who expose deception not out of vengeance, but out of love for what is still worth saving.

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Executive Summary

This document is a comprehensive addendum to prior reporting on Brian J. Auten's role in U.S. intelligence during the 2016 election. It synthesizes findings from the CIA's newly declassified July 2025 tradecraft review of the 2016 Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA), while connecting those findings to Auten's documented activities.

PURPOSE & SCOPE

The document has two objectives:

1. **Contextualizing the 2025 CIA Memo**: Summarizes and critiques the analytic and procedural failings in the 2016 ICA, especially the claim that Vladimir Putin "aspired" to help Donald Trump.
2. **Linking Auten to Criticized Processes**: Demonstrates how Brian Auten, though not named in the CIA review, was a key actor in the same intelligence fusion process now under scrutiny.

KEY CONTENT & FINDINGS

1. Summary of 2025 CIA Memo

- **Criticism**: The ICA was developed under intense time pressure, overly compartmented access, and with excessive senior leadership involvement. These led to compromised analytic rigor, particularly in the controversial judgment regarding Putin's preferences.
- **Main Tradecraft Failures**:
    - Overreliance on a single classified report.
    - Inappropriate use of "high confidence" language.
    - Inclusion of unverified Steele Dossier material.
    - Suppression of dissent and exclusion of alternative scenarios.
    - Premature signaling of leadership consensus (Brennan's message to staff).
- **Defended Elements**: The ICA still met most analytic tradecraft standards per ICD 203, especially in sourcing and structure—*except for the key judgment about Putin's intent*.

2. Brian Auten's Role

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- While not named in the CIA memo, the document argues:
    - Auten worked within the same analytic fusion process.
    - He vetted and approved Steele Dossier material used in FISA applications and potentially echoed in the ICA.
    - He was embedded in Crossfire Hurricane, which intersected with the Fusion Cell criticized in the CIA memo.
    - His work exhibited the same tradecraft failures: overconfidence, narrative bias, insufficient source verification.

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Addendum: Auten's Role and the Intelligence Fusion Criticized in the 2025 CIA Memo

The CIA's July 2025 declassified review of the 2017 Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA) reveals major flaws in how the U.S. intelligence apparatus—especially the CIA, FBI, and NSA—concluded that Vladimir Putin preferred Donald Trump in the 2016 election. It criticizes:

- Overreliance on a single unverified source
- "Confidence inflation" that led to high-certainty conclusions not justified by available intelligence
- Politically pressured timelines and lack of dissent tolerance

While the review does not name individual analysts, it directly implicates the *interagency fusion process* between CIA, FBI, and NSA that produced the flawed judgment.

Brian Auten's Documented Role in That Fusion

Multiple outside investigations—including DOJ IG reports, Durham's findings, and independent journalism—confirm that Brian J. Auten was at the center of that very fusion process:

- Auten was the Supervisory Intelligence Analyst on Crossfire Hurricane, vetting and synthesizing incoming intelligence from foreign sources, private contractors, and other agencies.
- He directly handled intel from Christopher Steele, Igor Danchenko, and Bruce Ohr, with Ohr acting as an informal channel from Fusion GPS to the FBI.

"Auten personally met with Steele… and processed the dirt Oh fed the FBI from Glenn Simpson of Fusion GPS."
RealClearInvestigations, July 10, 2020

- Auten also coordinated and helped draft FISA warrant materials that cited the Steele dossier—despite later admitting he could not verify its claims.
- His work informed the larger analytic stream that fed into joint FBI-CIA assessments, including the ICA now under scrutiny.

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Implication

While the CIA memo refrains from naming Auten or other FBI staff, the processes it critiques—overstated confidence, analytic groupthink, and poor source validation—are precisely the methods Auten engaged in and supervised during that time.

This overlap reinforces the argument made in *D5: Accountability at the FBI*:
Auten did not act in isolation—but as part of a broader culture of narrative-driven intelligence work that lacked rigor, restraint, and accountability.

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Appendix: Who was involved

Primary Individuals & Titles

- **John Ratcliffe** Director of the CIA ("DCIA") who ordered the review
- **Deputy Director of CIA for Analysis** Author of the memo to Ratcliffe
- **President Barack Obama** Directed DNI to order the assessment on Dec 6, 2016
- **James Clapper** Director of National Intelligence at the time, led the IC assessment
- **John Brennan** Then-CIA Director; advocated including the Steele dossier in ICA

Workgroups / Teams

- **CIA Directorate of Analysis (DA)** Conducted the lessons-learned tradecraft review
- **ICA authors** A small drafting team tasked with creating the assessment under tight deadlines
- **ICA reviewers / IC peers** Participants in the December 19 hard-copy line-by-line review
- **Senior CIA mission-center leaders** Two senior managers opposed dossier inclusion based on tradecraft concerns
- **"Fusion Cell"** Highly compartmented analytic cell created in July 2016 to concentrate Russian interference reporting

Agencies / Departments

- **Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)** Primary authoring agency
- **CIA Directorate of Analysis (DA)** Conducted post-mortem review
- **Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI)** Ordered comprehensive Russia assessment per President Obama
- **Intelligence Community (IC)** Collective of CIA, FBI, NSA, etc., coordinated ICA
- **National Security Agency (NSA)** Provided input with moderate confidence; part of IC
- **FBI** Contributed intelligence and high-confidence judgments

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Processes / Administrative Entities

- **Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA)** The January 2017 joint report on Russian election interference
- **"Compartmentation" system** Classification structure limiting access to ICA content
- **Tradecraft standards (ICD 203)** Guidelines governing intel analysis
- **Hard-copy coordination procedure** Physical distribution method for draft reviews

Summary Table

Category	Entry
Individuals/Titles	John Ratcliffe; Deputy Director of CIA for Analysis; President Obama; DNI James Clapper; CIA Dir. John Brennan
Workgroups/Teams	CIA Directorate of Analysis; ICA authors; ICA reviewers/peers; Mission-center leaders; Fusion Cell
Agencies	CIA; CIA-DA; ODNI; IC; NSA; FBI
Processes/Systems	ICA; Compartmentation; ICD 203 tradecraft standards; Hard-copy coordination

Relevance to Auten Reports

- The Fusion Cell, formed in July 2016, resembles the CIA/FBI/NSA analytic nexus in which Brian Auten also operated—processing dossier information for FISA drafts.
- The memo's sharp focus on compartmentation and confidence level management highlights the very practices that Auten's critics, namely, withholding key intel and overstating certainty.
- Auten isn't named, but every relevant workgroup and mechanism identified in this memo overlaps with the systems he navigated and influenced during Crossfire Hurricane and the 2017 ICA period.

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Appendix: U.S. Intelligence Workgroup Profiles

ICA – Intelligence Community Assessment (January 2017)

Affiliated Agencies: CIA, FBI, NSA (under ODNI supervision)
Purpose: To assess the intent, scope, and success of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.
Key Claims:

- Russia conducted cyber and influence operations to harm Hillary Clinton and help Donald Trump.
- Putin "aspired" to assist Trump's election prospects.
- Confidence levels varied: CIA and FBI claimed, "high confidence"; NSA offered only "moderate confidence."

Relevance to Auten:

- Though not named in the final ICA, Auten's Crossfire Hurricane analysis—including vetting Steele and Danchenko—fed into the broader intelligence stream that informed the ICA's conclusions.
- Both Brennan and Clapper oversaw or endorsed the use of unverified intelligence (including elements from Steele) during the ICA formulationD5 Accountability at th....

Fusion Cell / Fusion Centers

Agencies Involved: FBI (Counterintelligence Division, CTD, Criminal Division), CIA, DHS, NSA, and state-level fusion partners
Function: To coordinate domestic and international threat intelligence—merging criminal and counterintelligence investigations.

Key Role (2016–2020):

- Fusion architecture enabled informal and formal integration of politically sensitive intelligence—including Steele dossier data, Alfa Bank allegations, and Hunter Biden laptop suppression activities.

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- Director Wray testified about a **domestic terrorism hate crimes fusion cell**, which shows the structural precedent for these cross-divisional intelligence hubs Oversight of the Federal….

Relevance to Auten:

- Auten was deeply embedded in FBI intel analysis roles that interfaced with CI, CT, and DOJ units.
- RealClearInvestigations confirms he processed Fusion GPS material via Bruce Ohr, effectively participating in a "fusion pipeline" of political oppo research and formal FISA submissionD5 Accountability at th….

ASPIRE (CIA Analytic Line)

Stands for: Analytic Standards Program for Intelligence Review & Evaluation
Agency: CIA Directorate of Analysis
Function: ASPIRE refers to the internal review rubric the CIA uses to assess whether its intelligence products meet analytic tradecraft standards (accuracy, objectivity, sourcing).

Role in 2025 CIA Memo:

- While the July 2025 CIA declassified memo does not explicitly cite "ASPIRE," its language reflects ASPIRE's categories, including criticism of:
    - Overstated confidence
    - Lack of analytic dissent
    - Overreliance on a single uncorroborated source (i.e., Steele)

Relevance to Auten:

- Auten's role in approving the Steele dossier as "sufficiently credible" despite lack of verification mirrors the tradecraft failures ASPIRE was designed to prevent.

ODNI Analytic Fusion (via James Clapper)

Agency: Office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI)
Purpose: ODNI coordinates interagency analysis and prepares politically sensitive products like the ICA and PDBs (Presidential Daily Briefings).

Relevance:

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- DNI Clapper oversaw the ICA and has defended its conclusions despite later internal dissent.
- The ODNI functionally united FBI, CIA, and NSA analysts into a shared analytic channel for Russia-related election threats.
- No evidence names Auten as a direct participant in ICA drafting, but his analysis contributed upstream.

Crossfire Hurricane Intelligence Pipeline

FBI Workgroup: CIA analysts, legal counsel, agents (e.g., Strzok, Page, Clinesmith), and Supervisory Intelligence Analyst (Auten)
Activities:

- Validated and submitted FISA applications based on politically commissioned research (Steele dossier).
- Withheld exculpatory information (e.g., Carter Page's CIA contacts).
- Operated in parallel with DOJ NSD and CIA consultation during Steele/Ohr briefingsD5 Accountability at th....

Fusion GPS Role:

- External contractor feeding information to DOJ (via Bruce Ohr) and media contacts.
- FBI analysts, including Auten, processed and incorporated Fusion-sourced claims into surveillance procedures.

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Appendix: Consequences for the Republic

The content of the 2025 CIA memo, particularly as contextualized about Brian Auten and the 2016 Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA), has broad political, economic, and cultural implications, both historically (since 2016) and prospectively (post-2025). Below is a breakdown of each domain:

POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

1. Erosion of Public Trust in Intelligence Institutions

- The memo confirms long-suspected tradecraft failures, politicized judgment, and leadership bias—especially from CIA Director Brennan and FBI leadership.
- Reinforces the belief among many Americans that federal agencies are vulnerable to politicization and partisan agendas.

2. Validation of Critics of "Russiagate"

- Undermines the core assertion of the 2017 ICA—that Vladimir Putin definitively sought to help Donald Trump win.
- Vindicates those who argued the Russia-Trump narrative was inflated or misrepresented for political purposes.

3. Calls for Accountability and Reform

- Sparks renewed demands for oversight of the CIA, FBI, and ODNI.
- Leads to potential congressional investigations or hearings to examine the misuse of classified material, selective intelligence usage, and interagency manipulation.

4. Impact on Presidential Legitimacy and Elections

- Retroactively influences public opinion on the 2016 and 2020 elections.
- Raises questions about how intelligence products were used to justify surveillance, media leaks, and political narratives during Trump's presidency.

ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES

1. Chilling Effect on U.S. Tech and Intelligence Contractors

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- Confirms that unvetted private sources (e.g., Fusion GPS, Steele dossier) influenced national security decisions.
- Undermines confidence in the objectivity of analysts and intelligence contractors.

2. Increased Spending on Oversight and Compliance

- Agencies may be forced to implement new compliance systems, analytic tradecraft reviews, and reform programs to restore credibility.

3. Disruption of Foreign Investment and Election Security Industries

- U.S. credibility in cyber intelligence assessments may suffer, impacting election security tech contracts, NATO data-sharing, and U.S.-led election monitoring efforts abroad.

CULTURAL CONSEQUENCES

1. Deepened Political Polarization

- Confirms the worst fears of both sides:
    - The Right sees this as proof of "deep state" interference.
    - The Left is left defending a discredited intelligence product that shaped national discourse for years.

2. Legacy Media Discredit

- Mainstream outlets that championed the ICA conclusions without skepticism now face credibility backlash.
- Independent media and investigative journalists gain more public trust.

3. Normalization of Intelligence as a Political Tool

- Sets a dangerous precedent: future IC assessments may be viewed through a partisan lens rather than as objective evaluations.
- Fuels conspiracy culture, especially among youth skeptical of government narratives.

4. Historical Narrative Rewriting

- This memo becomes a pivot point in rewriting how the Trump-Russia era is understood.

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- May trigger a generational reevaluation of the Obama administration's role in shaping political narratives through intelligence.

CONCLUSION

The 2025 CIA memo and its exposure of analytic failures surrounding the 2016 election do more than correct a historical record. They:

- **Accelerate the public's loss of trust** in supposedly apolitical institutions.
- **Reframe modern political history**, particularly the Trump presidency and 2016–2020 discourse.
- **Trigger systemic and cultural shifts** in how intelligence is used, questioned, and interpreted in democratic societies.

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Appendix: Consequences for Participant

POSSIBLE CRIMINAL CHARGES (IF PURSUED)

1. 18 U.S.C. §1001 – False Statements

If any intelligence officials knowingly submitted false or misleading information (e.g., in FISA warrant applications, internal reports, or congressional briefings), they could be prosecuted for knowingly and willfully:

- Falsifying material facts,
- Omitting exculpatory evidence, or
- Misrepresenting confidence levels or source credibility.

Precedent: FBI lawyer Kevin Clinesmith pleaded guilty for altering an email in the Carter Page FISA warrant process.

Relevance to Auten: Auten's documented role in approving unverified Steele dossier material for FISA could expose him to legal scrutiny if it can be shown that he *knowingly* misled the FISA court or superiors.

2. 18 U.S.C. §242 – Deprivation of Rights Under Color of Law

If it's proven that surveillance (enabled by faulty intelligence) violated civil rights, this statute allows for charges against officials who, under authority of federal law, deprived someone of constitutionally protected rights.

Relevance: Unauthorized surveillance of U.S. citizens (like Carter Page) using unreliable or politically tainted information could trigger this provision.

3. 18 U.S.C. §1519 – Destruction or Falsification of Records in Federal Investigations

If anyone altered, destroyed, or concealed records to obstruct an official inquiry (e.g., internal CIA, DOJ IG, or Durham investigation), they could be charged.

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II. HUMAN RESOURCES / ADMINISTRATIVE ACTIONS

Even absent criminal prosecution, numerous **HR and disciplinary measures** would be valid and enforceable:

1. Security Clearance Revocation

Officials who:

- Showed poor judgment,
- Failed to validate sources,
- Compromised compartmental access integrity,
  could have their clearances revoked under Executive Order 12968, which requires "trustworthiness" and "sound judgment."

Auten reportedly had his clearance suspended during the Durham investigation.

2. Removal or Termination for Cause

Civil service rules (Title 5, U.S. Code) allow termination for:

- Insubordination,
- Poor performance,
- Conduct unbecoming a federal employee,
- Misuse of authority or analytical position.

This could apply to:

- Analysts who bypassed tradecraft standards,
- Senior officials who pressured others into shaping assessments.

3. Inspector General Referral / Disciplinary Report

The CIA Inspector General or Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) could refer to parties involved for:

- Misuse of process (e.g., Fusion Cell mismanagement),
- Failure to meet analytic tradecraft standards (ICD 203 violations),

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- Allowing political influence to shape intelligence judgments.

4. Congressional Referral or Censure

- Congressional oversight committees can refer individuals for disciplinary action, demand resignations, or recommend prosecution.
- High-profile precedents include post-Benghazi or post-9/11 intelligence failures, where officials were removed or reassigned even without criminal convictions.

III. CONDITIONS NEEDED FOR LEGAL ACTION

Legal or disciplinary consequences would require:

- Proof of *intent* or *gross negligence*,
- Documented evidence of process violation,
- Whistleblower corroboration or testimony,
- Judicial or congressional authorization (e.g., special counsel, subpoena power).

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Appendix: AI Analysis of Individuals and Possible Charges (not verified, for discussion only)

INDIVIDUAL / ENTITY	PRIMARY ACTION	POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES
BRIAN AUTEN	Approved Steele content, supported flawed FISA	Clearance revocation, firing, criminal referral
JOHN BRENNAN	Directed Fusion Cell, inserted dossier	Congressional censure, IG referral, clearance loss
JAMES CLAPPER	Led politicized ICA process	Public rebuke, oversight reform targeting ODNI
PETER STRZOK / LISA PAGE	Crossfire intel pipeline	Previously fired; further inquiry possible
KEVIN CLINESMITH	Altered evidence for FISA	Already convicted; possible follow-up investigation
BRUCE OHR	Acted as improper intermediary	DOJ review, ethics violation, termination
FUSION GPS / STEELE	Fed political oppo to IC pipeline	Civil or FARA liability, barred from gov contracts
CIA DA / ICA AUTHORS	Complied under pressure, failed to resist	Internal discipline, retraining
ODNI (CLAPPER ERA)	Enabled politicized process	Legislative reform, process overhaul

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Appendix: Trump Related Biographies

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Adam Schiff

U.S. Representative from California

Born: June 22, 1960
Education: Stanford University (B.A.); Harvard Law School (J.D.)

Career Background

Adam Schiff has served as a Democratic congressman representing California's 30th congressional district (formerly the 28th) since 2001. Before entering politics, Schiff worked as a federal prosecutor in the U.S. Attorney's Office in Los Angeles. He gained national attention through his role on the **House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence**, where he served as both Ranking Member and Chairman.

Schiff became a key figure in multiple high-profile investigations, including the **Trump–Russia probe**, impeachment inquiries, and oversight of the intelligence community.

Role in Crossfire Hurricane and the Steele Dossier

As a central figure on the House Intelligence Committee during the **Crossfire Hurricane** investigation, Schiff staunchly defended the use of the **Steele dossier** and the FBI's actions. He pushed back against Republican claims of FISA abuse and publicly argued that evidence of collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia was compelling.

Schiff co-authored the **Democratic rebuttal** to the **Nunes Memo**, in which he defended the FBI's process for securing FISA warrants and emphasized the importance of ongoing investigations.

However, findings from the **DOJ Inspector General's report** and **Durham's investigation** later revealed shortcomings in the FBI's handling of the Steele dossier, leading to criticism of Schiff's unwavering defense of its credibility.

Hunter Biden Laptop and Media Messaging

In October 2020, Schiff was one of the most prominent voices labeling the **Hunter Biden laptop** as Russian disinformation. He cited intelligence sources and echoed a letter signed by 51 former intelligence officials to discredit the story as a foreign influence operation.

This public messaging helped support media and tech platforms in limiting the story's spread, an action that critics argue suppressed legitimate information during a critical election window.

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Schiff has since defended his position, stating that the potential for Russian disinformation was a national security concern. Nevertheless, disclosures that the FBI had already authenticated the laptop in 2019 undermined his claims.

Impeachment and Broader Oversight

Schiff played a central role as **lead impeachment manager** during President Trump's first impeachment trial in 2020. He focused on allegations that Trump abused his power by pressuring Ukraine to investigate political rival Joe Biden.

His work in the impeachment trial bolstered his image among Democrats while drawing intense criticism from Republicans, who accused him of partisanship and overreach.

Significance

Adam Schiff's career highlights the intense politicization of intelligence oversight in the modern era. He has been praised for his dedication to national security and criticized for allegedly prioritizing political narratives over objective inquiry.

His legacy is deeply intertwined with the debate over truth, transparency, and partisanship in U.S. intelligence and law enforcement operations.

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Aleksej Gubarev

Russian Technology Executive; CEO of XBT Holding and Webzilla

Born: March 3, 1980
Nationality: Russian

Career Background

Aleksej Gubarev is a Russian technology entrepreneur and the CEO of **XBT Holding**, a global web hosting and internet infrastructure company, and its subsidiary **Webzilla**. Based in Cyprus and operating internationally, Gubarev has built a reputation in the tech industry for providing backend infrastructure to a range of digital businesses.

He had little public political profile prior to being unexpectedly named in the **Steele dossier**, compiled by former British spy **Christopher Steele** as opposition research against Donald Trump.

Mention in the Steele Dossier and Legal Action

The final memo in the Steele dossier alleged that Gubarev and his companies were involved in Russian hacking operations targeting the Democratic Party. The dossier claimed Gubarev's infrastructure was used by Russian operatives to launch cyberattacks and spread malware.

These allegations were never substantiated by U.S. intelligence or law enforcement and were widely viewed as defamatory.

In response, Gubarev filed a **defamation lawsuit** against **BuzzFeed News**, which published the full, unverified dossier in January 2017. The lawsuit became a central test case of journalistic responsibility, source vetting, and the consequences of publishing raw intelligence.

Although BuzzFeed issued a partial retraction and later redacted his name, the damage to Gubarev's reputation and business had already been done.

Legal Outcomes and Fallout

The lawsuit led to extended litigation in U.S. courts, where Gubarev's legal team pressed for transparency regarding the sourcing of the dossier and BuzzFeed's editorial decision-making. The case was settled in 2019 under undisclosed terms, and BuzzFeed avoided a judgment by successfully arguing that publication was newsworthy given the dossier's use in official briefings.

Significance

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Aleksej Gubarev's experience underscores the dangers of publishing unverified intelligence, especially when it implicates private individuals in serious criminal activity without corroboration. His case became a symbol of the collateral damage wrought by the dossier's release.

To critics of the dossier and its dissemination, Gubarev is an innocent victim of politicized espionage tactics. His legal response highlighted broader concerns about due process, reputation, and the role of media in amplifying raw intelligence.

His inclusion in the dossier—and its subsequent publication—helped ignite a debate on the ethics of media and the standards of intelligence-to-public transmission in politically charged environments.

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Alexander Downer

Australian Diplomat and Former High Commissioner to the United Kingdom

Born: September 9, 1951
Education: University of Newcastle (B.A. in Politics and Economics); University of Oxford (MA)

Career Background

Alexander Downer is an Australian diplomat and politician who served as Australia's Foreign Minister from 1996 to 2007 and later as the Australian High Commissioner to the United Kingdom (2014–2018).

Downer played a pivotal but indirect role in the origin of the FBI's Crossfire Hurricane investigation. In May 2016, during a conversation with George Papadopoulos, a foreign policy adviser to the Trump campaign, Papadopoulos reportedly disclosed that Russia had damaging information on Hillary Clinton. Downer passed this information to U.S. authorities, which the FBI later cited as the trigger for opening the Trump-Russia probe.

Role in Crossfire Hurricane

Although not an investigator, Downer's report to U.S. officials marked the formal start of what would become a multi-year investigation into alleged Trump campaign ties to Russia. His memo was included in official FBI documents as a justification for opening the counterintelligence inquiry.

Critics questioned the reliability and motivation of the report, while defenders argued that any indication of foreign election interference merited a formal inquiry.

Public Statements and Rebuttals

Downer has repeatedly defended his actions and denied any improper motivation. He stated that his decision to relay Papadopoulos's remarks to U.S. intelligence was based on standard diplomatic protocol.

He has rejected claims that he was part of any plot to undermine the Trump campaign, asserting that his contact with Papadopoulos was routine and that the subsequent investigation was out of his hands.

Significance

Though Alexander Downer did not work for a U.S. agency, his actions and report indirectly catalyzed one of the most consequential political investigations in recent history. His role

Jeff Pierson

illustrates how international diplomatic encounters can ripple into major geopolitical events.

His inclusion in the narrative underscores the global dimensions of the Trump-Russia probe and the international sensitivity of political intelligence-sharing.

Jeff Pierson

Andrew G. McCabe

Former Deputy Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2016–2018)

Born: March 18, 1968
Appointed Deputy Director by: FBI Director James Comey
Previous Roles:

- Assistant Director, Counterterrorism Division
- FBI National Security Branch Executive

Role in Crossfire Hurricane and the Steele Dossier

Andrew McCabe played a central leadership role in the FBI's handling of the Crossfire Hurricane investigation, which targeted alleged ties between the Trump campaign and Russian operatives. As Deputy Director, McCabe had oversight over the FBI's Counterintelligence Division and directly supervised key figures such as Peter Strzok and Lisa Page.

McCabe approved the FISA warrant applications against Trump campaign advisor Carter Page, which relied heavily on the unverified Steele dossier. He was aware of concerns raised about the reliability of dossier sources but allowed the surveillance applications to proceed. McCabe signed off on at least one FISA renewal.

He also had knowledge of meetings between FBI officials and Christopher Steele, and he was informed of Steele's contacts with the press prior to the 2016 election—an issue that should have impacted the bureau's assessment of Steele's credibility.

Internal Investigations and Fallout

In 2018, the DOJ's Inspector General concluded that McCabe had "lacked candor" under oath during an internal investigation regarding leaks to the Wall Street Journal. He was fired in March 2018, just days before his planned retirement, resulting in the loss of his pension.

McCabe denied wrongdoing, claiming his dismissal was politically motivated. However, his termination was recommended by the FBI's Office of Professional Responsibility based on the IG's findings.

Despite being referred for possible criminal prosecution, the DOJ declined to press charges in 2020.

Jeff Pierson

Public Role and Legacy

Since leaving the FBI, McCabe has become a CNN analyst, author, and frequent commentator on national security issues. His memoir, *The Threat*, defends his actions while criticizing the Trump administration's attacks on federal law enforcement.

Public opinion on McCabe is divided: some view him as a scapegoat for Trump's political attacks, while others consider him emblematic of internal bias and politicization at the highest levels of the FBI.

Significance

Andrew McCabe's career reflects the institutional failures of oversight, vetting, and objectivity in the FBI's highest ranks during the 2016 election cycle. His decisions helped shape the bureau's reliance on the Steele dossier, and his lack of transparency damaged the FBI's reputation for impartial law enforcement. His story is a cautionary tale about the dangers of blurred lines between intelligence gathering and political influence.

Jeff Pierson

Andrew Weissmann

Former Lead Prosecutor for Special Counsel Robert Mueller

Born: March 17, 1958
Education: Princeton University (B.A.); Columbia Law School (J.D.)

Career Background

Andrew Weissmann is a career federal prosecutor known for his aggressive legal style and high-profile cases. He served as general counsel to the FBI under Robert Mueller, chief of the DOJ's Criminal Fraud Section, and lead prosecutor in the **Enron task force**.

Under Special Counsel **Robert Mueller**, Weissmann led the criminal investigations that stemmed from the **Trump–Russia probe**, including prosecutions of **Paul Manafort**, **Rick Gates**, and **Michael Cohen**.

Role in the Mueller Investigation

Weissmann's influence on the **Mueller Report** was significant. Critics argue that his partisan leanings shaped the tone and direction of the investigation. Though the report found **no criminal conspiracy** between the Trump campaign and Russia, it detailed potential instances of **obstruction of justice**, fueling continued political debate.

Republicans accused Weissmann of bias and overreach, pointing to his Democratic political donations and previous attendance at Hillary Clinton's election night party. Supporters, meanwhile, viewed him as a tenacious advocate for the rule of law.

Public Commentary and Legacy

After leaving the DOJ, Weissmann became a legal analyst and author. In his book, *Where Law Ends*, he criticized decisions made during the Mueller probe and blamed constraints imposed by leadership for not pursuing certain charges against Trump.

His post-investigation advocacy includes calls for reforms to protect special counsels and limit executive power. He remains a prominent voice in debates about accountability, presidential immunity, and DOJ independence.

Significance

Weissmann remains one of the most polarizing figures associated with the Trump investigations. To critics, he epitomizes the risk of partisan influence in prosecutorial power. To supporters, he represents an effort to uphold justice in the face of unprecedented executive pressure.

Jeff Pierson

His legacy is central to understanding how investigations into presidents can become lightning rods in America's political culture.

Jeff Pierson

Ben Smith

Journalist; Former Editor-in-Chief of BuzzFeed News

Born: November 4, 1976
Education: Yale University (B.A. in English)

Career Background

Ben Smith is an American journalist known for his leadership at **BuzzFeed News**, where he served as **Editor-in-Chief** from 2011 to 2020. Prior to BuzzFeed, he worked at **Politico**, **The New York Observer**, and **The New York Sun**. After BuzzFeed, he became the **media columnist for The New York Times** and later co-founded **Semafor**, a global news startup.

Smith is recognized for his role in modernizing digital journalism, emphasizing viral content, real-time news, and social media engagement. Under his leadership, BuzzFeed expanded into investigative journalism and political reporting.

Publication of the Steele Dossier

On January 10, 2017, Smith made the highly controversial decision to publish the full, unverified **Steele dossier** on BuzzFeed News, just days after CNN reported that President-elect Trump had been briefed on its existence.

The dossier included salacious and unsubstantiated claims about Trump and alleged ties to Russia. While major media outlets refrained from publishing the entire document due to credibility concerns, Smith defended the move as a matter of transparency, stating that Americans had the right to see what their government was considering.

The publication triggered widespread backlash. Critics accused BuzzFeed of compromising journalistic standards and fueling misinformation. Others argued the decision was pivotal in setting the tone for the Russia-Trump controversy that followed.

Legal and Institutional Repercussions

Following the publication, BuzzFeed was sued for defamation by several individuals named in the dossier, including Russian tech executive **Aleksej Gubarev**. The lawsuits highlighted the tension between public interest and reputational harm in journalism involving raw intelligence.

Smith continued to defend the decision, emphasizing the importance of transparency in a media environment shaped by leaks, intelligence briefings, and political spin.

Significance

Jeff Pierson

Ben Smith's role in the Steele dossier controversy illustrates the power and peril of editorial discretion in the digital age. His choice to publish the dossier made BuzzFeed a central actor in the national debate over Russia collusion, press ethics, and the intersection of journalism and intelligence.

To critics, he symbolizes the erosion of fact-based reporting in favor of sensationalism. To supporters, he upheld the public's right to access critical information—however unverified—being used at the highest levels of government.

Smith's legacy is one of disruption, and his impact on political journalism continues to be debated in the context of misinformation and media

Jeff Pierson

Bruce Ohr

Former Associate Deputy Attorney General, U.S. Department of Justice

Born: March 1958
Education: Harvard College (B.A.); Harvard Law School (J.D.)

Background and DOJ Career

Bruce Ohr served in the Department of Justice for over two decades, holding roles including Associate Deputy Attorney General and Director of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETF). He was known for his expertise in transnational organized crime and money laundering.

His connection to the Russia investigation became controversial due to undisclosed contacts with Christopher Steele and Fusion GPS co-founder Glenn Simpson.

Role in the Russia Probe

In 2016 and 2017, Bruce Ohr served as a backchannel between Steele and the FBI after the bureau formally cut ties with Steele for leaking to the press. Ohr met with Steele numerous times and passed his information to the FBI, which incorporated some of it into the Crossfire Hurricane investigation.

Ohr's wife, Nellie Ohr, worked for Fusion GPS during this period and contributed Russia-related research used in the dossier. This familial tie raised additional concerns about conflicts of interest.

Internal Reviews and Testimony

Bruce Ohr was the subject of scrutiny in the 2019 DOJ Inspector General's report, which criticized his failure to inform DOJ leadership about his ongoing contact with Steele and Fusion GPS. He was demoted in 2017, eventually resigning in 2020 before a formal disciplinary review could conclude.

In congressional testimony, Ohr defended his actions as necessary to keep the FBI informed of Steele's ongoing intelligence. Lawmakers across party lines, however, questioned his lack of transparency and perceived conflict of interest.

Significance

Bruce Ohr played an unofficial but consequential role in sustaining Steele's influence over the FBI's Russia probe. His case exemplifies the ethical dilemmas and procedural irregularities that plagued the investigation from the outset.

Jeff Pierson

Ohr's indirect facilitation of dossier intelligence despite internal FBI warnings adds another layer to the narrative of institutional bias and insufficient oversight within the DOJ.

Jeff Pierson

Charles Dolan Jr.

Public Relations Executive and Longtime Democratic Operative

Born: c. 1950s
Affiliations: Ketchum Public Relations, Democratic National Committee, Clinton campaigns

Background and Political Ties

Charles "Chuck" Dolan Jr. is a veteran Democratic public relations executive with deep ties to the Clinton political machine. He previously served as state chairman for the Democratic Party of Virginia, was an advisor to Bill Clinton's 1992 and 1996 campaigns, and worked closely with figures in the Clinton orbit throughout the 2000s.

Dolan held positions at Ketchum Communications, where he worked on public diplomacy efforts involving Russia, and maintained contacts with Russian officials, businesspeople, and journalists.

Role in the Steele Dossier

According to Special Counsel John Durham's investigation, Dolan was a key source cited in the Steele dossier, though his involvement was misrepresented by Igor Danchenko during interviews with the FBI. Danchenko claimed not to have had contact with Dolan regarding the dossier's content, a claim later debunked by email and travel records.

Durham's indictment of Danchenko alleged that Dolan unknowingly contributed fabricated anecdotes that were later inserted into the dossier, including details about Trump's alleged activities in Moscow. These anecdotes were taken from public events or imagination yet were framed as intelligence.

Legal and Public Fallout

Dolan has not been charged with any crime, but his role in the inception and contamination of the Steele dossier further undermined its credibility. His contributions—though possibly made in good faith—became part of a disinformation loop that affected U.S. intelligence assessments and media narratives.

Despite being deeply embedded in Democratic political circles, Dolan has largely avoided public scrutiny and has not made significant media appearances or issued formal statements regarding his role.

Significance

Jeff Pierson

Charles Dolan Jr.'s involvement reflects the blurring of partisan political strategy and intelligence operations. His presence in the Steele dossier, despite his proximity to the Clinton campaign, raises questions about the origins and motivations behind the document that helped launch Crossfire Hurricane.

Dolan's profile also highlights the risks posed when political actors—intentionally or not—become sources in national security investigations.

Jeff Pierson

Christopher David Steele

Former British Intelligence Officer, Private Intelligence Consultant, Author of the Steele Dossier

Born: June 24, 1964
Nationality: British
Affiliation: Orbis Business Intelligence (Co-founder)
Former Employer: Secret Intelligence Service (MI6)

Background

Christopher Steele is a former officer in the United Kingdom's Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), where he served from 1987 until 2009. Steele specialized in Russian affairs and was stationed in Moscow during his career. After leaving MI6, he co-founded Orbis Business Intelligence, a London-based private intelligence firm that provides corporate and political risk analysis.

Role in the Steele Dossier and Crossfire Hurricane

In 2016, Steele was hired by Fusion GPS, a U.S.-based research firm working on behalf of Perkins Coie, the law firm representing the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and the Hillary Clinton presidential campaign. Steele was tasked with gathering opposition research on Donald J. Trump, specifically alleged connections between Trump and the Russian government.

Between June and December 2016, Steele compiled a series of memos containing explosive but largely unverified allegations of Russian kompromat and conspiracy involving the Trump campaign. These documents were later collectively known as the Steele dossier.

Steele provided his findings to his Fusion GPS handlers, the FBI, and select media outlets. He also met with State Department officials and reporters, fueling public and political interest in Trump-Russia allegations. The FBI used Steele's material, without independent verification, as part of its FISA applications to surveil Trump campaign advisor Carter Page a central aspect of the Crossfire Hurricane investigation.

According to the DOJ Inspector General report (2019) and the Durham Report (2023), the FBI failed to corroborate Steele's claims and continued to use his reporting even after internal contradictions surfaced. Brian Auten, an FBI intelligence analyst, later testified that the FBI offered Steele up to $1 million to validate his sources an offer that was never fulfilled.

Jeff Pierson

Steele's primary source, Igor Danchenko, eventually contradicted many key elements of the memos, further discrediting the document. Steele himself refused to name some sources and defend others, citing confidentiality, which drew sharp criticism from legal and intelligence professionals.

Public Fallout and Legacy

Christopher Steele has become a polarizing figure. Supporters view him as a conscientious professional raising early warnings about foreign interference. Critics view him as a reckless partisan actor whose unverified intelligence distorted an American presidential election and triggered years of misleading investigation and media coverage.

The dossier's impact on U.S. politics, law enforcement credibility, and foreign policy has been profound. Steele has stood by the integrity of his work in public comments but has acknowledged that some material may have been inaccurate or overblown. In subsequent interviews, he has insisted that his reporting was meant as raw intelligence, not as a finished assessment.

Significance

Steele's dossier became the linchpin of the Trump-Russia narrative, used to justify surveillance, frame political narratives, and shape public perception during and after the 2016 election. His involvement illustrates how private intelligence, partisan funding, and weak institutional checks can converge to produce consequences far beyond the scope of original intent.

Jeff Pierson

Chuck Grassley

U.S. Senator from Iowa

Born: September 17, 1933
Education: University of Northern Iowa (B.A., M.A.)

Legislative Career

Chuck Grassley has served in the United States Senate since 1981 and is one of the longest-serving Republican lawmakers in American history. He previously served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1975 to 1981. Throughout his career, Grassley has focused on government oversight, whistleblower protection, and transparency within federal agencies.

He is known for his work on the Senate Judiciary Committee and the Senate Finance Committee, where he has investigated corruption and misuse of power at the federal level. His long tenure has made him a prominent figure in debates over the integrity of federal institutions.

Role in Oversight of FBI and DOJ

Grassley was instrumental in uncovering irregularities within the FBI and DOJ related to the Crossfire Hurricane investigation and the Steele dossier. As Chair and later Ranking Member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, he demanded answers regarding:

- The use of unverified intelligence in FISA applications.
- The FBI's handling of the Steele dossier.
- Potential political bias in the initiation of surveillance on Trump campaign officials.

Grassley issued numerous letters to DOJ and FBI officials demanding accountability and transparency. He also advocated for the public release of related documents, including the DOJ Inspector General's report and the Durham Report.

Involvement in Hunter Biden Laptop Controversy

Senator Grassley was among the earliest and most vocal elected officials questioning the FBI's handling of the Hunter Biden laptop. He co-authored reports suggesting that high-ranking intelligence officials mischaracterized the laptop as disinformation and called for further investigation into the matter.

Jeff Pierson

Grassley worked closely with Senator Ron Johnson on these issues and helped bring forward whistleblower allegations concerning suppression of evidence and political interference within federal agencies.

Significance

Grassley's work has helped bring to light internal misconduct and lapses in accountability at the highest levels of government. His persistence has made him a central figure in calls for institutional reform and transparency. His career serves as a model for Congressional oversight and the checks and balances vital to democratic governance.

Jeff Pierson

David Corn

Journalist; Washington Bureau Chief for Mother Jones

Born: February 20, 1959
Education: Brown University (B.A. in History)

Career Background

David Corn is a veteran investigative journalist and author. He serves as the **Washington Bureau Chief for Mother Jones**, a progressive news organization. Corn previously wrote for *The Nation* and has contributed to MSNBC, *Politico*, and numerous other outlets. He is known for his reporting on national security, intelligence, and political corruption.

Corn has authored or co-authored several books, including *Hubris* (with Michael Isikoff), which explored the case for war in Iraq and government misinformation.

Role in Steele Dossier Publication

Corn was the first journalist to publicly report on the **existence of the Steele dossier** before the 2016 election. In an October 31, 2016 article for *Mother Jones*, he described the dossier's alarming allegations regarding Trump's potential ties to Russian intelligence. Corn did not publish the full contents but provided a synopsis based on anonymous sourcing.

He later admitted that his source was likely Christopher Steele himself or someone closely associated with the Fusion GPS network. The article played a key role in introducing the dossier narrative into public awareness before the dossier became a political flashpoint.

Media and Congressional Reactions

Corn's early reporting was hailed by some on the left as bold and prescient, while critics accused him of recklessly advancing unverified claims during a highly sensitive election cycle. His actions were later scrutinized during investigations into how the dossier circulated within media, law enforcement, and political circles.

Though Corn defended his reporting, Republicans in Congress cited him in their analysis of how opposition research was laundered into public discourse.

Significance

David Corn's reporting on the Steele dossier represents a turning point in media engagement with intelligence-adjacent stories. His willingness to publicize explosive claims—even under anonymity—set the stage for a broader media frenzy that followed BuzzFeed's full publication in January 2017.

Jeff Pierson

To his critics, Corn's work exemplifies political journalism blurred with advocacy, helping to seed a narrative that deeply affected national politics. To his defenders, he exposed a legitimate threat based on credible sources within the intelligence community.

Corn's involvement in this episode underscores the profound influence of journalists in shaping perceptions of intelligence, even before official investigations begin.

Jeff Pierson

Devin Nunes

Former U.S. Representative from California

Born: October 1, 1973
Education: California Polytechnic State University (B.S.); California State University, Fresno (M.S.)

Career Background

Devin Nunes represented California's 22nd congressional district from 2003 until 2022. He served as Chair and later Ranking Member of the **House Intelligence Committee**, where he became a central figure in investigations related to intelligence community conduct, the **Trump–Russia probe**, and the **Steele dossier**.

A strong supporter of President Donald Trump, Nunes has been one of the most vocal critics of what he perceived as bias and misconduct within the FBI and DOJ during the Crossfire Hurricane investigation.

Role in Crossfire Hurricane and the Steele Dossier

As Chair of the House Intelligence Committee, Nunes authored the **"Nunes Memo"** in 2018. This memo alleged that the FBI abused the **FISA** process by relying on unverified information from the Steele dossier to obtain surveillance warrants on **Carter Page**, a former Trump campaign advisor.

Nunes' efforts helped raise awareness of the potential political motivations behind the surveillance and led to further scrutiny of the dossier's origins and handling. His committee conducted interviews and released transcripts shedding light on the internal deliberations of intelligence officials.

Hunter Biden Laptop and Disinformation Concerns

While still in Congress, Nunes raised concerns about the **FBI's handling of the Hunter Biden laptop** and joined others in questioning the accuracy of the "Russian disinformation" label. He has argued that suppressing the laptop story contributed to election interference and undermined public trust in federal agencies.

Post-Congressional Career

Nunes left Congress in 2022 to become the CEO of Trump Media & Technology Group. In this role, he has continued to speak out against perceived censorship, media bias, and federal overreach.

Significance

Jeff Pierson

Devin Nunes played a key role in bringing to public attention the internal irregularities surrounding major FBI investigations. His work helped launch broader congressional inquiries and influenced the release of the **DOJ Inspector General's report** and the **Durham Report**.

Whether seen as a truth-teller or partisan, Nunes shaped the political debate around surveillance, bias, and democratic accountability in the intelligence community.

Jeff Pierson

Devon Archer

Business Associate of Hunter Biden; Former Board Member of Burisma Holdings

Born: 1974 (estimated)
Education: Yale University (B.A.)

Career Background

Devon Archer is an American businessman who co-founded Rosemont Seneca Partners alongside Hunter Biden and Christopher Heinz, stepson of former Secretary of State John Kerry. Archer's work involved investments and consulting, often in international markets.

He gained public attention due to his role on the board of Burisma Holdings, a Ukrainian energy company, where he served alongside Hunter Biden. The company was under investigation by Ukrainian prosecutors at the time, raising concerns over potential conflicts of interest.

Legal Troubles and Testimony

Archer was convicted in 2018 for his role in a tribal bond fraud scheme, unrelated to Burisma, in which investors were defrauded of millions. He was sentenced to over a year in prison but became a key witness in congressional investigations concerning the Biden family.

In 2023, Archer testified before Congress, stating that Hunter Biden occasionally put his father, then-Vice President Joe Biden, on speakerphone during meetings with business partners. While Archer did not confirm that Joe Biden discussed business details, his testimony was used by critics to support allegations of influence peddling.

Significance

Devon Archer remains a controversial figure whose relationship with Hunter Biden has fueled investigations into whether the Biden family leveraged political connections for financial gain.

Supporters argue that Archer's testimony lacked conclusive evidence of wrongdoing by President Biden, while critics view it as a window into broader ethical concerns.

His role is emblematic of the blurred lines between business, politics, and family influence in modern political scandals.

Jeff Pierson

Fiona Hill

Former National Security Council Senior Director for Europe and Russia

Born: October 1965
Education: University of St Andrews (B.A.); Harvard University (M.A., Ph.D. in History)

Career Background

Fiona Hill is a foreign affairs specialist with a focus on Russia and Eastern Europe. She worked at the Brookings Institution and served in senior policy roles across both Republican and Democratic administrations.

From 2017 to 2019, Hill served as Senior Director for Europe and Russia at the National Security Council (NSC) under President Donald Trump. Her tenure coincided with key phases of the Trump-Russia investigations and the events leading up to the first Trump impeachment.

Role in Trump Investigations

Hill became a public figure after her testimony during the 2019 impeachment inquiry, where she addressed President Trump's alleged pressure campaign on Ukraine. She testified that Rudy Giuliani and others sought to advance politically motivated investigations, including into Hunter Biden.

While not directly involved in Crossfire Hurricane or the Steele dossier, Hill worked closely with intelligence officials and participated in deliberations involving Russia policy and election interference assessments. Her name surfaced in broader discussions of foreign influence operations and institutional responses.

Public Testimony and Impact

Hill's testimony was widely regarded as articulate and compelling. She warned about the dangers of promoting conspiracy theories and foreign propaganda. Her defense of career intelligence professionals and criticism of partisan attacks on national security institutions elevated her profile.

After leaving the government, Hill returned to academic and policy work. She continues to write and speak on threats to democracy, Russian disinformation, and the politicization of intelligence.

Significance

Jeff Pierson

Fiona Hill represents the voice of a nonpartisan intelligence community professional who sought to defend institutional integrity amid political turbulence. Her public role highlighted the tensions between career officials and political appointees.

To many, she symbolizes the principled resistance to the misuse of intelligence for partisan ends. To critics, her involvement in impeachment proceedings positioned her as aligned with the president's opponents.

Her career underscores the geopolitical risks and internal strains in how the U.S. confronts foreign threats while maintaining democratic accountability.

Jeff Pierson

Franklin Foer

Journalist; Staff Writer for The Atlantic; Author

Born: July 20, 1974
Education: Columbia University (B.A. in History)

Career Background

Franklin Foer is an American journalist and author who has worked at prominent publications including *The New Republic*, *Slate*, and currently *The Atlantic*. He is recognized for his in-depth reporting on politics, foreign affairs, and technology, and is the author of *World Without Mind* and *The Last Politician*.

Foer is part of a family of writers and intellectuals, including his brothers Jonathan and Joshua Foer. His writing often explores the intersection of politics, ideology, and institutional power.

Role in Trump-Russia Allegations

Foer gained national attention for his October 31, 2016, article in *Slate* titled **"Was a Trump Server Communicating With Russia?"** The piece speculated on alleged communications between a Trump Organization email server and Russia-based Alfa Bank. The story was part of a series of reporting efforts around the same time that raised public and media suspicion about potential Trump-Russia collusion.

The article was widely shared, but its claims were later **disputed** by cybersecurity experts, the FBI, and Special Counsel **Robert Mueller**, who found no evidence supporting the server allegations.

Controversy and Media Impact

While the Foer article never mentioned the **Steele dossier**, it contributed to the climate of suspicion surrounding Trump and Russia leading up to the 2016 election. It was later revealed that individuals connected to **Fusion GPS** and **Perkins Coie** had circulated the Alfa Bank theory, raising concerns about the blending of opposition research with media narratives.

Foer defended his reporting as a sincere investigation into troubling data, but critics argued that it illustrated how unverified or speculative material entered mainstream discourse in a politically weaponized way.

Significance

Jeff Pierson

Franklin Foer's involvement in early Trump-Russia reporting underscores the media's pivotal role in shaping public understanding of intelligence-linked allegations. Though some of his reporting has been discredited or challenged, Foer remains a respected voice in political journalism and commentary.

His story on the Trump-Alfa Bank connection is now viewed as a case study in the **risks of rapid-cycle media**, especially during high-stakes political contests.

To supporters, Foer was sounding the alarm about genuine national security concerns. To critics, he exemplified the dangers of narrative-driven journalism that outpaces evidence.

Jeff Pierson

Fusion GPS Team (Glenn Simpson and Peter Fritsch)

Co-Founders of Fusion GPS; Investigative Research Firm Central to the Steele Dossier

Glenn Simpson
Born: April 22, 1964
Education: George Washington University (B.A. in Journalism)

Peter Fritsch
Born: 1966
Education: Oberlin College (B.A.); Harvard Kennedy School (M.P.A.)

Career Background

Glenn Simpson and Peter Fritsch are former journalists who co-founded **Fusion GPS** in 2009. The firm specializes in opposition research, corporate investigations, and strategic intelligence for clients ranging from law firms to political campaigns.

Simpson was a longtime reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*, focusing on financial crime and government corruption. Fritsch also worked at *The Wall Street Journal* as a foreign correspondent and editor. Their experience in investigative journalism formed the foundation of Fusion GPS's research-driven methodology.

Role in Commissioning the Steele Dossier

In 2016, **Perkins Coie**, on behalf of the **Hillary Clinton campaign and the DNC**, hired Fusion GPS to conduct opposition research on **Donald Trump**. Fusion then retained **Christopher Steele**, a former MI6 officer, to produce memos on Trump's alleged ties to Russia. These memos would become known as the **Steele dossier**.

Simpson and Fritsch acted as intermediaries between Steele and several journalists, briefing members of the media on the dossier's contents prior to the 2016 election. They also helped facilitate Steele's contact with the FBI.

Investigations and Congressional Testimony

Fusion GPS became a central subject in multiple congressional investigations and the **Durham investigation**. Glenn Simpson testified before the House and Senate Intelligence Committees, but was often criticized for evasive answers or invoking attorney-client privilege.

Emails and documents later revealed that Fusion GPS was involved in efforts to plant negative stories in the media based on Steele's work. Critics alleged the firm acted more like a political advocacy shop than a neutral research body.

Jeff Pierson

Significance

Fusion GPS has become synonymous with opposition research controversies and the blurred lines between intelligence, politics, and media. While its defenders claim the firm was performing standard political research, its deep involvement in circulating unverified intelligence raised lasting questions about ethics and transparency.

To critics, Simpson and Fritsch's actions helped trigger a national scandal that fueled political divisions, undermined public trust, and embroiled federal law enforcement in partisan conflict.

In 2019, Simpson and Fritsch co-authored *Crime in Progress*, a book defending their work on the dossier and offering their perspective on Russian interference and Trump's ties to foreign actors.

Their role remains a focal point in discussions about the influence of privately commissioned intelligence in shaping national narratives and legal outcomes.

Jeff Pierson

George Papadopoulos

Foreign Policy Advisor to the Trump 2016 Campaign

Born: August 19, 1987
Education: DePaul University (B.A.); University College London (M.A. in Security Studies)

Career Background

George Papadopoulos is a former energy consultant who joined Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign as a foreign policy advisor. His background included work in energy security and policy development related to the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East.

Though not a senior figure, his involvement in the campaign became a critical component of the FBI's justification for launching the Crossfire Hurricane counterintelligence investigation.

Role in Crossfire Hurricane Investigation

Papadopoulos's role became pivotal after a May 2016 conversation in London with Australian diplomat Alexander Downer. During the meeting, Papadopoulos allegedly mentioned that Russia had damaging information on Hillary Clinton, which the FBI later cited as the initial basis for its Trump-Russia investigation.

In October 2017, Papadopoulos pleaded guilty to making false statements to the FBI regarding the timing and nature of his contacts with foreign nationals who claimed to have connections to Russian officials. He served 12 days in prison in 2018.

Impact and Public Statements

Papadopoulos has since become a vocal critic of the investigation and contends that he was targeted and entrapped by U.S. and foreign intelligence services. He published a book detailing his account and has appeared on various media platforms arguing that the Russia probe was a politically motivated setup.

He was pardoned by President Donald Trump in December 2020.

Significance

George Papadopoulos's case represents the FBI's earliest rationale for probing possible ties between the Trump campaign and Russia. While his direct influence on campaign decisions was limited, the investigation stemming from his remarks triggered years of political turmoil and institutional scrutiny.

Jeff Pierson

His involvement continues to be debated, with some viewing him as a naive operative caught in a geopolitical trap, and others as a potential conduit for foreign interference.

Papadopoulos remains a key figure in understanding how minor actors can have outsized impacts on global events through intelligence and law enforcement processes.

Jeff Pierson

Glenn Simpson

Co-Founder of Fusion GPS, Journalist, and Opposition Research Consultant

Born: 1964
Education: George Washington University (B.A. in Journalism)

Background and Career

Glenn Simpson is a former journalist who worked for The Wall Street Journal before co-founding Fusion GPS, a Washington D.C.-based opposition research firm. His experience as an investigative reporter specializing in financial crimes and political corruption positioned him to transition into private intelligence work.

Role in the Steele Dossier and Crossfire Hurricane

In 2016, Fusion GPS was retained by the law firm Perkins Coie on behalf of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Hillary Clinton's campaign to conduct opposition research on Donald Trump.

Simpson hired Christopher Steele, a former MI6 officer, to compile intelligence on Trump's alleged ties to Russia. Steele's reports were compiled into what became the Steele dossier.

Simpson also facilitated backchannel communications between Steele and U.S. media and law enforcement, helping disseminate elements of the dossier's claims to the FBI and select journalists.

Congressional Testimony and Controversy

Glenn Simpson testified before the House Intelligence Committee and the Senate Judiciary Committee in 2017 and 2018. In his testimony, he defended Fusion GPS's work and denied coordinating with foreign governments.

Simpson stated that Fusion GPS's research was consistent with journalistic standards, but critics—including lawmakers and the DOJ Inspector General—argued that the firm's activities helped blur the line between partisan opposition research and intelligence gathering.

Simpson has faced scrutiny for the lack of verification of Steele's sources, and for his firm's involvement in facilitating connections between politically motivated research and the U.S. intelligence community.

Significance

Jeff Pierson

Glenn Simpson was a central figure in the creation and dissemination of the Steele dossier, making him a pivotal player in the Crossfire Hurricane investigation. His firm's engagement with Steele and subsequent efforts to publicize the dossier shaped early narratives around Trump-Russia collusion.

Simpson's role underscores the risks of outsourcing intelligence functions to private firms with political clients, and how such arrangements can distort both public discourse and institutional decision-making.

Jeff Pierson

Hillary Rodham Clinton

Former U.S. Secretary of State, Senator, and 2016 Democratic Presidential Nominee

Born: October 26, 1947
Political Party: Democratic
Positions Held:

- U.S. Secretary of State (2009–2013)
- U.S. Senator from New York (2001–2009)
- First Lady of the United States (1993–2001)

Role in the Crossfire Hurricane / Steele Dossier Controversy

Hillary Clinton was the Democratic nominee for president in the 2016 election. During her campaign, the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and her campaign's law firm, Perkins Coie, hired Fusion GPS, an opposition research firm, to investigate then-candidate Donald Trump. Fusion GPS subcontracted Christopher Steele, a former British MI6 officer, to compile a series of intelligence memos that became known as the Steele dossier.

Although Clinton did not personally direct Steele's work, the funding for the dossier was traced back to the Clinton campaign and the DNC, a fact that was concealed for months and only made public after legal and journalistic investigations. The contents of the dossier much of it unverified or later discredited were used by the FBI in its application for FISA surveillance of Trump campaign advisor Carter Page, making the dossier central to the Crossfire Hurricane investigation.

Clinton and her team publicly promoted the Trump-Russia collusion narrative throughout the campaign and after the election. In October 2016, her campaign amplified media reports tied to dossier claims. Former Clinton campaign officials later testified that they were aware of the dossier's origins but viewed it as a tool to raise national security concerns about Trump.

The connection between Clinton's campaign, the DNC, and the dossier has remained a major point of controversy, particularly after DOJ and Congressional investigations revealed how heavily the FBI relied on the uncorroborated document. Critics argue that her campaign's opposition research was transformed into the basis of a federal counterintelligence investigation, blurring the line between political strategy and institutional power.

Significance

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Hillary Clinton's indirect but pivotal role in the funding and promotion of the Steele dossier has had lasting political, legal, and institutional implications. The dossier contributed to years of investigations, media narratives, and public distrust in both the FBI and broader U.S. intelligence operations. Her campaign's involvement serves as a focal point in ongoing debates over election integrity, government neutrality, and the weaponization of intelligence.

Hunter Biden

Attorney, Businessman, and Son of President Joe Biden

Born: February 4, 1970
Education: Georgetown University (B.A.); Yale Law School (J.D.)

Career Background

Hunter Biden is the second son of President Joe Biden and has had a varied career as a lawyer, lobbyist, and investment adviser. He has served on multiple corporate boards and co-founded Rosemont Seneca Partners, a consultancy firm.

Hunter's international business dealings—particularly his board membership with Ukrainian energy firm Burisma Holdings and ventures in China—have been a source of political controversy and media scrutiny.

Role in Political Investigations

Hunter Biden became a central figure in the Trump administration's efforts to question the integrity of President Biden's political conduct. His laptop, allegedly abandoned at a Delaware repair shop in 2019, was eventually obtained by the FBI and became a focal point in debates over media bias, disinformation, and censorship.

The laptop reportedly contained emails and personal files suggesting questionable foreign business dealings and raising ethical concerns. Critics argued the contents warranted criminal investigation, while defenders claimed the material was manipulated or taken out of context.

In October 2020, the laptop's contents were published by the New York Post, prompting backlash from social media platforms and intelligence officials who labeled it potential Russian disinformation. Internal documents later confirmed the laptop's authenticity and showed it had been in FBI possession since 2019.

Investigations and Legal Issues

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As of 2023, Hunter Biden has been the subject of multiple federal investigations involving tax issues, foreign lobbying, and firearm possession violations. He reached a plea agreement in 2023 on certain charges, though broader questions remain unresolved.

Congressional committees have launched further inquiries into his business ties and the extent to which they may have intersected with his father's political activities.

Significance

Hunter Biden's activities have become a lightning rod for political controversy. To critics, he symbolizes the blurred lines between political influence and personal gain. To defenders, his struggles with addiction and recovery are weaponized unfairly for political purposes.

His case continues to influence debates over media responsibility, law enforcement impartiality, and family ethics in politics. As a figure at the center of partisan conflict, Hunter Biden's legacy may ultimately reflect broader concerns about elite accountability and institutional transparency.

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Igor Danchenko

Igor Danchenko

Russian-Born Analyst, Primary Sub-Source for the Steele Dossier

Born: c. 1978 (Leningrad, USSR, now St. Petersburg, Russia)
Nationality: Naturalized U.S. citizen (Russian-born)
Education:

- Moscow State University (Russia)
- University of Louisville (B.A.)
- Georgetown University (M.A. in Political Science and Security Studies)

Profession:

- Political risk analyst and researcher
- Former senior research analyst at the **Brookings Institution**

Role in the Steele Dossier

Igor Danchenko is best known as the primary sub-source for the Steele dossier, a series of memos compiled in 2016 by former British spy Christopher Steele for Fusion GPS. Danchenko's interviews and reporting formed the core allegations in the dossier, including claims of collusion between the Trump campaign and Russian operatives.

Danchenko was unmasked in 2020 as the main source behind much of the unverified content. Subsequent investigations by the DOJ Inspector General (2019) and Special Counsel John Durham (2023) revealed that many of Danchenko's statements to Steele were hearsay, speculation, or based on conversations with unidentified acquaintances, some of whom later denied making the claims attributed to them.

Notably, FBI intelligence analyst Brian Auten interviewed Danchenko in early 2017 and found his revelations to be inconsistent with the way Steele had presented them. Despite this, the FBI continued to rely on the dossier in its applications for FISA warrants against Carter Page, omitting these contradictions from subsequent court filings.

Legal Proceedings and Durham Investigation

In November 2021, Igor Danchenko was indicted by Special Counsel John Durham on five counts of making false statements to the FBI during his interviews in 2017. The charges focused on Danchenko allegedly lying about:

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- Communicating with Sergei Millian, a Belarusian American businessman, who was cited in the dossier as a key source. Millian denied ever speaking to Danchenko.
- Fabricating conversations to bolster Steele's claims, particularly about Trump campaign-Russia collusion.

In October 2022, Danchenko was acquitted on all charges by a jury in federal court. The outcome was a setback for Durham's prosecution, though the trial did expose significant failures in the FBI's vetting process and over-reliance on unverified intelligence.

Controversy and Significance

Danchenko's role sits at the center of the Crossfire Hurricane scandal. While he did not write the Steele dossier himself, his input shaped many of its most explosive and later-discredited claims. His lack of firsthand knowledge, reliance on anonymous sources, and shifting accounts undermined the dossier's credibility yet these flaws were not disclosed in time to prevent its use in surveillance and public narratives.

Danchenko's background, including prior contacts with Russian intelligence officials, also raised red flags within the FBI that were not adequately pursued or disclosed during the FISA process.

Summary

- **Position:** Primary source for Steele dossier
- **FBI Status:** Interviewed multiple times; inconsistencies documented
- **Legal Outcome:** Indicted (2021), acquitted (2022)
- **Legacy:** Danchenko's reporting was foundational to a dossier that misled federal courts, intelligence operations, and the American public during and after the 2016 election.

Jeff Pierson

Jack Smith

Special Counsel, U.S. Department of Justice

Born: June 5, 1969
Education: State University of New York at Oneonta (B.A.); Harvard Law School (J.D.)

Career and Prosecutorial Background

Jack Smith is a veteran federal prosecutor appointed as Special Counsel by Attorney General Merrick Garland in November 2022. He was tasked with overseeing two high-profile investigations related to former President Donald Trump: the retention of classified documents at Mar-a-Lago and Trump's role in the events of January 6, 2021.

Smith previously served as chief of the DOJ's Public Integrity Section and as a war crimes prosecutor at The Hague. His career is marked by a focus on political corruption, public trust violations, and high-stakes accountability.

Role as Special Counsel

Smith's mandate involves determining whether federal laws were violated in Trump's retention and potential mishandling of classified materials after leaving office. He has also investigated Trump's efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 election, leading to an unprecedented criminal indictment of a former U.S. president.

Smith's appointment was designed to ensure prosecutorial independence amid claims of partisanship. While praised by many for his diligence, Smith has also faced sharp criticism from conservative lawmakers and commentators who question the fairness of the investigation.

Significance

Jack Smith's investigation marks a historic legal confrontation between the executive branch and its former occupant. His role reflects a broader institutional struggle to assert the rule of law in a hyper-partisan environment.

Whether his prosecutions are ultimately seen as courageous defense of democratic norms or politically motivated overreach will depend on legal outcomes and public perception in the years ahead.

Jeff Pierson

James Baker

Former FBI General Counsel

Born: c. 1960s
Education: University of Notre Dame (B.A.); University of Michigan Law School (J.D.)

Background and Legal Career

James A. Baker served as the FBI's General Counsel during the most politically turbulent years of the agency's recent history, including the 2016 presidential election and the Trump–Russia investigation. Before joining the FBI, Baker had a distinguished career at the Department of Justice, particularly in national security and intelligence law. He was known for his expertise in FISA and surveillance law, and he previously served as Counsel for Intelligence Policy.

Role in the Crossfire Hurricane Investigation

Baker was involved in the early stages of the FBI's Crossfire Hurricane operation, particularly regarding the legal review of FISA applications to surveil Trump campaign adviser Carter Page. He received the information from Michael Sussmann that alleged a secret communication channel between the Trump Organization and Alfa Bank. Baker later testified that he could not recall Sussmann disclosing his connection to the Clinton campaign at the time.

Baker's office played a pivotal role in reviewing and approving legal justifications used to support FISA warrants based in part on the now-discredited Steele dossier.

Involvement in FBI Legal Oversight

As General Counsel, Baker had broad responsibility for ensuring the FBI's compliance with constitutional, statutory, and regulatory legal frameworks, particularly those governing intelligence gathering. During his tenure, several controversial decisions were made regarding how politically sensitive information was handled and escalated.

He left the FBI in 2018 and later joined Twitter as Deputy General Counsel, where he was involved in content moderation and policy enforcement related to sensitive political topics — including the handling of the Hunter Biden laptop story in 2020.

Post-Government Role and Controversy

Baker's transition to Twitter drew scrutiny during congressional hearings into social media censorship and government influence. He was implicated in internal email discussions regarding the temporary suppression of the New York Post's reporting on Hunter Biden's

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laptop, contributing to concerns that former intelligence officials were coordinating with private platforms to shape political narratives.

Significance

James Baker remains one of the most consequential legal figures in recent intelligence history. His roles at both the FBI and Twitter placed him at the heart of decisions with deep constitutional and political ramifications. Critics accuse him of lacking transparency and accountability, while supporters argue he sought to protect national security amid unprecedented political pressure.

Baker's biography underscores how the revolving door between government and tech platforms can blur lines between national security and political messaging — a dynamic at the center of current debates on the role of federal agencies in democratic society.

Jeff Pierson

Jake Tapper

Journalist; CNN Anchor and Chief Washington Correspondent

Born: March 12, 1969
Education: Dartmouth College (B.A. in History)

Career Background

Jake Tapper is a prominent American journalist, author, and television anchor. He serves as CNN's Chief Washington Correspondent and host of *The Lead with Jake Tapper* and *State of the Union*. Tapper previously worked at ABC News and *Salon*, and is known for his sharp interview style and coverage of major political developments.

He began his career in journalism following early work in public relations and briefly as a campaign press secretary.

Coverage of Russia Investigations and Steele Dossier

Tapper played a key role in the early dissemination of the Steele dossier story. In January 2017, CNN was the first major outlet to report that President-elect Trump had been briefed on the existence of the dossier—without disclosing its full contents.

This report, co-authored by Tapper, was pivotal in prompting BuzzFeed News to publish the full unverified document shortly afterward, igniting a media firestorm.

Tapper defended CNN's decision as responsible journalism based on factually accurate reporting that a briefing had occurred. Critics argued the network's framing legitimized a politically explosive and unverified piece of opposition research.

Role in Public Narrative and Political Debate

Throughout the Russia investigation and Trump presidency, Tapper has been a frequent commentator on national security, intelligence, and election integrity. His segments often featured breaking developments related to the Mueller probe, FISA warrants, and Crossfire Hurricane.

While widely respected for holding public officials accountable, Tapper has also faced criticism from conservatives who view his coverage as slanted against Trump and overly credulous of sources promoting the Russia collusion narrative.

Significance

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Jake Tapper's influence on the Russia-Trump narrative exemplifies the media's role in amplifying intelligence-adjacent controversies. His reporting shaped public understanding and political fallout surrounding the Steele dossier and the broader collusion allegations.

To critics, Tapper symbolizes how mainstream media contributed to the erosion of public trust through reliance on anonymous sources and selective emphasis. To supporters, he remains a steadfast journalist navigating a polarized media landscape.

His work underscores the power of broadcast journalism in shaping political reality, particularly during high-stakes investigations.

Jeff Pierson

John Brennan

Former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)

Born: September 22, 1955
Education: Fordham University (B.A.); University of Texas at Austin (M.A. in Government, Middle Eastern Studies)

Career Background

John Brennan served as CIA Director from 2013 to 2017 under President Barack Obama. A longtime intelligence official, he held various senior roles within the CIA and the White House, including Deputy National Security Advisor for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism. He was deeply involved in the development of drone warfare policy and counterterrorism efforts in the post-9/11 era.

Brennan was known for his advocacy of intelligence modernization and was a central figure in the Obama administration's foreign policy and national security apparatus.

Role in Russia Interference Investigations

Brennan played a prominent role in shaping the U.S. intelligence community's response to Russian election interference in 2016. He oversaw the CIA's contributions to the Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA) that determined Russia sought to influence the election in favor of Donald Trump.

He has acknowledged that the Steele dossier was among the sources considered during the compilation of the ICA, although not a primary basis. Critics argue that his public statements inflated the credibility of unverified claims about Trump and Russia.

Brennan testified before Congress in 2017, stating that he had seen intelligence indicating contacts between Russian officials and Trump campaign associates that raised concern, though he stopped short of asserting direct collusion.

Hunter Biden Laptop and Public Commentary

In October 2020, Brennan joined 50 other former intelligence officials in signing an open letter suggesting that the Hunter Biden laptop had "all the classic earmarks of a Russian information operation." This letter influenced media and tech platforms to restrict coverage of the story.

Subsequent disclosures showed the laptop had been verified by federal authorities as early as 2019, fueling criticism that Brennan and others contributed to politically motivated suppression of information.

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Significance

Brennan has been a frequent public commentator and critic of the Trump administration, contributing to partisan perceptions of former intelligence officials. To defenders, he is a dedicated public servant raising alarms about foreign interference. To critics, he exemplifies how intelligence figures can become politicized actors in public life.

His post-government activities have heightened scrutiny on the role of intelligence leaders in shaping electoral narratives and public trust in federal institutions.

Jeff Pierson

James Clapper

Former Director of National Intelligence (DNI)

Born: March 14, 1941
Education: University of Maryland (B.S.); St. Mary's University (M.A. in Political Science)

Career Background

James Clapper is a retired lieutenant general in the United States Air Force and served as the **Director of National Intelligence (DNI)** from 2010 to 2017 under President Barack Obama. In this role, he oversaw the entire U.S. intelligence community, including agencies such as the CIA, NSA, and FBI.

Clapper previously served as Director of the **Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA)**, the **National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA)**, and held senior intelligence roles in the Pentagon.

Involvement in Russia-Related Controversies

As DNI, Clapper was a key figure in the Obama administration's response to Russian election interference in 2016. He helped coordinate the **January 2017 Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA)** that concluded Russia had interfered in the election to aid Donald Trump's candidacy.

Clapper defended the use of the **Steele dossier** as part of the broader intelligence effort to assess Russian activities, though he acknowledged the dossier was not verified and was not the sole basis for any assessments.

He became a vocal public critic of President Trump, frequently appearing on cable news and opining on national security issues. His criticism further fueled accusations of political bias within the intelligence community.

Role in the Hunter Biden Laptop Letter

In October 2020, Clapper was one of 51 former intelligence officials who signed an open letter suggesting the **Hunter Biden laptop story** bore the hallmarks of a Russian disinformation campaign. This letter was widely cited by media and tech platforms to justify suppression or moderation of the story.

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It was later revealed that the FBI had already verified the authenticity of the laptop by that time. Critics charged Clapper and others with contributing to an intelligence-enabled narrative that may have influenced the 2020 election.

Significance

James Clapper's long service in the intelligence community lends weight to his public commentary, but his post-retirement activities have drawn scrutiny. His role in shaping narratives surrounding both Russian interference and the Hunter Biden laptop reflects the evolving influence of former intelligence officials in shaping public opinion.

To critics, Clapper represents a revolving door between intelligence and partisan media. To supporters, he is a seasoned public servant warning of foreign threats. His legacy is one of complex entanglement between intelligence expertise and political messaging.

Jeff Pierson

James B. Comey

Former Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2013–2017)

Born: December 14, 1960
Appointed by: President Barack Obama
Removed by: President Donald J. Trump (May 9, 2017)
Previous Roles:

- Deputy Attorney General (Bush administration)
- U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York
- General Counsel, Lockheed Martin and Bridgewater Associates

Role in Crossfire Hurricane and the Steele Dossier

James Comey served as FBI Director during the launch and early handling of the Crossfire Hurricane investigation, which opened on July 31, 2016. The probe examined possible connections between the Trump campaign and Russian election interference, later drawing significant scrutiny over its reliance on unverified intelligence, especially the Steele dossier.

Comey authorized the use of Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) warrants against Trump campaign advisor Carter Page, including renewals that incorporated material from the dossier—despite growing evidence of its lack of credibility. Comey later testified before Congress that he considered the dossier "salacious and unverified," even though it had been cited as supporting evidence to obtain surveillance approval.

In January 2017, Comey participated in a classified briefing with then-President-elect Trump, during which he personally informed Trump about the existence of the dossier. That same briefing became public within days, after details were leaked to the press, culminating in BuzzFeed publishing the full Steele dossier.

Firing and Aftermath

Comey was fired by President Trump in May 2017, a decision that sparked the appointment of Robert Mueller as Special Counsel and intensified partisan divisions over the Russia investigation. Comey later testified that he deliberately leaked his memos about Trump meetings to a friend with instructions to get the story into the media, which led to political backlash and an internal FBI probe.

The DOJ Inspector General's 2019 report and the Durham Report (2023) both criticized the FBI's leadership for failing to validate the dossier before using it in court proceedings. Though Comey claimed he was misled by subordinates, critics argue he bore ultimate

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responsibility for the misuse of uncorroborated evidence and the politicization of the bureau.

Public Image and Commentary

Comey has positioned himself as a defender of institutional norms and rules of law. In 2018, he published a memoir titled *A Higher Loyalty*, which was later adapted into a miniseries. He remains an outspoken public figure and commentator, often criticizing the Trump administration while defending his tenure at the FBI.

However, his legacy is sharply divided: he is praised by some as a principled civil servant who resisted political pressure and condemned by others as an architect of partisan overreach who damaged the FBI's credibility and helped fuel years of institutional distrust.

Significance

James Comey's leadership during Crossfire Hurricane placed him at the center of one of the most controversial domestic intelligence investigations in modern American history. His approval of FISA warrants based on unverified, opposition-funded material, and his post-hoc defenses of the bureau's decisions, made him a central figure in the debate over federal overreach, intelligence politicization, and the erosion of public trust.

Jeff Pierson

Jeff Sessions

84th United States Attorney General

Born: December 24, 1946
Education: Huntingdon College (B.A.); University of Alabama School of Law (J.D.)

Background and Political Career

Jefferson Beauregard Sessions III served as a U.S. Senator from Alabama for two decades before being appointed as U.S. Attorney General by President Donald Trump in 2017. Known for his strong conservative positions, Sessions focused on law and order, immigration enforcement, and limiting federal overreach during his Senate career.

As Attorney General, Sessions was a key figure in implementing the Trump administration's law enforcement and immigration policies. His tenure was also marked by intense scrutiny due to his early contacts with the Russian ambassador during the 2016 campaign.

Recusal from Russia Investigation

In March 2017, Sessions recused himself from overseeing any Justice Department investigations related to the 2016 presidential campaign, including the Trump–Russia probe. This decision followed revelations that he had not disclosed contacts with Russian officials during his confirmation hearings.

His recusal led to Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein appointing Robert Mueller as Special Counsel to continue the investigation into alleged coordination between the Trump campaign and Russian actors.

Tensions with President Trump

Sessions' decision to recuse himself caused a deep rift with President Trump, who repeatedly criticized him publicly and privately for what he perceived as a betrayal. Trump believed Sessions' recusal enabled what he saw as an unchecked and partisan investigation.

Despite the criticism, Sessions remained in his role until November 2018, when he submitted his resignation at the president's request.

Significance

Jeff Sessions' role in the Trump administration, particularly his recusal from the Russia investigation, set in motion a chain of events that led to the appointment of a Special Counsel and heightened partisan conflict over the Department of Justice's independence.

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His tenure highlights the complexity of political loyalty, ethical boundaries, and institutional responsibility. Sessions' experience underscores the importance of legal integrity — and the political cost of upholding it under pressure.

Jeff Pierson

Jennifer Palmieri

Former Communications Director for Hillary Clinton's 2016 Campaign; Former White House Communications Director

Born: November 15, 1966
Education: American University (B.A. in Political Science)

Career Background

Jennifer Palmieri is a veteran political strategist, author, and communications expert. She served as **White House Communications Director** under President Barack Obama and was the **Director of Communications** for Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign.

Palmieri previously worked in the Clinton administration and held roles with the **Center for American Progress**, a progressive policy think tank. Her expertise lies in shaping political narratives and managing crisis communications.

Role in the Clinton Campaign and Russia Narrative

As the chief communications officer for the Clinton campaign, Palmieri was instrumental in crafting the campaign's public messaging—including statements regarding Donald Trump's alleged ties to Russia.

She was involved in disseminating campaign-approved narratives based in part on the **Steele dossier** and related opposition research. Palmieri's name has been cited in investigative reports examining how unverified claims entered mainstream discourse and influenced media coverage.

Though she did not personally source or commission the dossier, her team promoted related stories to media outlets and supported messaging that amplified suspicions of Trump-Russia collusion.

Public Commentary and Advocacy

Following the 2016 election, Palmieri became an outspoken critic of Donald Trump and has written extensively on the challenges of media manipulation and political messaging. Her memoir, *Dear Madam President*, reflects on the campaign and the broader role of women in politics.

She has continued to appear on cable news programs and in editorial columns defending the Clinton campaign's posture during the Russia controversy.

Significance

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Jennifer Palmieri's role illustrates how high-level campaign communication teams can drive national narratives, especially when they intersect with intelligence-based allegations. Her influence helped elevate politically charged stories during a pivotal moment in U.S. electoral history.

To critics, her efforts contributed to the politicization of intelligence and media complicity in spreading unverified information. To supporters, she defended democracy against what was believed at the time to be a serious national security threat.

Jeff Pierson

Jim Jordan

U.S. Representative from Ohio

Born: February 17, 1964
Education: University of Wisconsin–Madison (B.S.); Ohio State University (M.Ed.); Capital University Law School (J.D.)

Career Background

Jim Jordan is a Republican congressman representing Ohio's 4th congressional district since 2007. A founding member of the House Freedom Caucus, Jordan is known for his combative oversight style and strong defense of constitutional liberties, limited government, and free speech.

He has served on the House Oversight Committee and is currently the Chair of the House Judiciary Committee, where he plays a key role in investigating alleged government abuses.

Role in Intelligence Oversight

Jordan has been a leading figure in exposing the perceived politicization of the FBI and DOJ, particularly in the aftermath of the Crossfire Hurricane investigation and the Hunter Biden laptop controversy.

He has:

- Conducted high-profile hearings featuring whistleblowers from within the FBI.
- Questioned the use of FISA warrants against Trump campaign officials.
- Investigated the suppression of the Hunter Biden story on social media.

His committee has been instrumental in uncovering internal communications and policy decisions that may reflect political bias within law enforcement agencies.

Advocacy and Legislative Impact

Jordan continues to push for reform of FISA laws, protections for whistleblowers, and a full accounting of intelligence agency conduct during the Trump and Biden presidencies. He advocates stronger congressional oversight to restore public trust in federal institutions.

He is widely regarded as one of the most influential Republicans on legal and constitutional matters in the House of Representatives.

Significance

Jeff Pierson

Jim Jordan's aggressive oversight of the intelligence community has reshaped the political conversation around surveillance, bias, and institutional accountability. His role is central to the current debate over government transparency, civil liberties, and the proper role of federal law enforcement in a constitutional republic.

Joseph Mifsud

Maltese Academic and Former Diplomat Allegedly Linked to Intelligence Contacts

Born: 1960 (estimated)
Education: University of Malta (B.A., M.A.); University of Padua (Ph.D.)

Career Background

Joseph Mifsud is a Maltese academic who held positions at several European universities and institutions, including the University of Stirling, Link Campus University in Rome, and the London Academy of Diplomacy. He was also associated with international policy conferences and think tanks, often presenting himself as a diplomatic intermediary.

His ties to various diplomatic and academic institutions made him a familiar face in transatlantic policy circles. However, questions later arose about whether he was linked to Western or Russian intelligence services—or operating independently with a network of ambiguous affiliations.

Role in the Trump-Russia Investigation

Mifsud became a central figure in the Crossfire Hurricane investigation after he informed Trump campaign aide George Papadopoulos in April 2016 that the Russian government possessed "dirt" on Hillary Clinton in the form of thousands of emails.

This disclosure preceded Papadopoulos's infamous meeting with Alexander Downer, which ultimately triggered the FBI's counterintelligence investigation into the Trump campaign.

Mifsud subsequently disappeared from public view after his name became known in the press, fueling speculation about his true affiliations. He was interviewed by the FBI in early 2017 but has not appeared publicly since.

Allegations and Speculation

Mifsud has been alternately described as a Russian agent, a Western intelligence asset, or an independent operator. The Mueller Report cited his interactions with Papadopoulos but did not establish his precise role or loyalty.

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Attorney General William Barr and Special Counsel John Durham reportedly pursued leads regarding Mifsud's possible connections to Western intelligence, but no definitive public conclusions have been released.

Significance

Joseph Mifsud remains one of the most enigmatic figures in the Trump-Russia controversy. His fleeting contact with Papadopoulos served as the foundational event in the FBI's Russia investigation, yet his own background and affiliations are shrouded in mystery.

Whether he acted on behalf of a government or as a rogue academic, his influence on one of the most politically consequential investigations in modern American history is indisputable. His disappearance only deepens the intrigue surrounding his role.

Jeff Pierson

John Durham

Special Counsel, United States Department of Justice

Born: March 16, 1950
Education: Colgate University (B.A.); University of Connecticut School of Law (J.D.)

Background and Legal Career

John H. Durham is a veteran federal prosecutor who has served in various high-profile roles within the U.S. Department of Justice. He gained a reputation as a meticulous and nonpartisan investigator with decades of experience handling complex criminal cases, organized crime, and public corruption.

Durham previously led investigations into law enforcement misconduct, including FBI corruption in Boston involving Whitey Bulger and CIA destruction of interrogation videotapes, both of which earned him bipartisan respect.

Appointment as Special Counsel

In May 2019, Attorney General William Barr appointed Durham to investigate the origins and conduct of the FBI's Crossfire Hurricane operation. In October 2020, Barr elevated Durham to **Special Counsel** status to ensure the continuity of the probe through the transition of presidential administrations.

Durham's mandate was to examine whether FBI or DOJ officials abused their authority or broke the law during the Trump–Russia investigation and subsequent surveillance activities.

Findings and Prosecutions

Durham's multi-year investigation culminated in the Durham Report, released in May 2023. It criticized the FBI for launching Crossfire Hurricane based on insufficient evidence and for failing to adhere to basic standards of intelligence verification. The report concluded that investigators exhibited significant confirmation bias and relied too heavily on politically sourced material, including the Steele dossier.

Durham secured a guilty plea from FBI attorney Kevin Clinesmith, who admitted to falsifying evidence in a FISA application. However, his prosecutions of Igor Danchenko and Michael Sussmann resulted in acquittals, leading critics to claim the investigation yielded little in the way of legal accountability.

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Despite limited convictions, Durham's report had a broader impact: it vindicated many concerns about politicization and malfeasance within the FBI while reigniting calls for systemic reform.

Public Statements and Reaction

Durham rarely spoke publicly, maintaining a reputation for quiet diligence. His report, however, was cited by both lawmakers and media as evidence of entrenched institutional bias. Supporters argued he exposed grave misconduct, while critics called the investigation politically motivated or lacking in prosecutorial success.

Significance

John Durham's role in investigating the investigators made him a consequential figure in the post-2016 political and legal landscape. While his legacy is debated, his work revealed deep fractures in public confidence in intelligence and law enforcement institutions. His findings continue to shape discussions about transparency, reform, and political neutrality within federal agencies.

Jeff Pierson

Jake Sullivan

National Security Advisor to President Joe Biden; Former Clinton Campaign Advisor

Born: November 28, 1976
Education: Yale University (B.A., J.D.); University of Oxford (M.Phil., International Relations as a Rhodes Scholar)

Career Background

Jake Sullivan is a prominent Democratic policy advisor and foreign policy strategist. He served as **National Security Advisor to Vice President Joe Biden** during the Obama administration and later became **Chief Foreign Policy Advisor** to Hillary Clinton during her 2016 presidential campaign.

Sullivan is currently serving as **National Security Advisor to President Joe Biden**, where he oversees U.S. foreign policy, global security strategy, and intelligence coordination at the highest level.

Role in Russia Narrative and the Clinton Campaign

Sullivan played a central communications role in the **Clinton campaign's efforts to elevate concerns** about Donald Trump's alleged connections to Russia. He was one of the most vocal advocates of the narrative linking Trump to Kremlin interference and publicly referenced claims later traced to the **Steele dossier** and the **Alfa-Bank allegations**.

On October 31, 2016, Sullivan issued a now-notable statement highlighting supposed secret communications between Trump's business and Russia's Alfa-Bank. This was based on data later deemed unsubstantiated. The statement coincided with media stories that amplified the Alfa-Bank claims, influencing voter perception just days before the election.

Controversies and Congressional Scrutiny

While Sullivan was not accused of wrongdoing, his proximity to the Clinton campaign's messaging and his promotion of unverified intelligence raised questions during investigations by congressional Republicans and in public discourse.

Critics argue that Sullivan's public messaging contributed to a misinformation climate that weaponized intelligence leads for partisan advantage. His defenders note that he acted in good faith based on information available at the time.

Significance

Jeff Pierson

Jake Sullivan's role illustrates how senior campaign officials can influence media narratives, particularly when dealing with intelligence-adjacent information. His later rise to **National Security Advisor** has reignited debate about the long-term consequences of campaign-era messaging strategies.

To supporters, he is a skilled and principled strategist. To critics, his involvement in promoting unsubstantiated allegations exemplifies a broader breakdown in standards of political and intelligence communication.

Jeff Pierson

John Ratcliffe

Former Director of National Intelligence; Former U.S. Representative from Texas

Born: October 20, 1965
Education: University of Notre Dame (B.A.); Southern Methodist University School of Law (J.D.)

Career Background

John Ratcliffe served as the **Director of National Intelligence (DNI)** under President Donald Trump from May 2020 to January 2021. Before that, he represented Texas's 4th congressional district in the U.S. House of Representatives from 2015 to 2020.

Ratcliffe was a former U.S. Attorney and held various legal and national security positions. He became a key Trump ally during investigations into alleged foreign election interference and FBI misconduct.

Role as DNI and Views on Crossfire Hurricane

As DNI, Ratcliffe oversaw the nation's intelligence agencies and was responsible for coordinating intelligence efforts across multiple domains. He declassified several key documents related to the **Crossfire Hurricane** investigation and the origins of the **Steele dossier**, aiming to increase transparency and expose intelligence abuses.

Ratcliffe argued that the FBI misused intelligence reporting and selectively withheld exculpatory information during the Trump-Russia investigation. He worked closely with congressional Republicans and provided evidence used in the **Durham investigation**.

Commentary on the Hunter Biden Laptop

Ratcliffe was one of the first high-ranking officials to publicly state that the **Hunter Biden laptop** was not Russian disinformation. He contradicted claims made by former intelligence officials and emphasized that intelligence agencies had no evidence linking the laptop's origin to a foreign campaign.

His statements were later supported by internal FBI documentation showing the agency had verified the laptop's contents by late 2019.

Post-Government Involvement

Since leaving office, Ratcliffe has remained vocal on intelligence and election integrity issues. He has appeared on media outlets to discuss surveillance reform, political bias in intelligence agencies, and foreign threats to U.S. democracy.

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Significance

John Ratcliffe played a pivotal role in bringing to light internal discrepancies and misconduct within the intelligence community. His tenure marked a rare moment where the Director of National Intelligence took direct steps to challenge his own agency's prior actions and increase transparency during a politically volatile era.

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Kevin Clinesmith

Former FBI Attorney, National Security and Cyber Law Division

Born: 1984 (approximate)
Education: Iowa State University (B.S.); Georgetown University Law Center (J.D.)

Role in Crossfire Hurricane

Kevin Clinesmith served as an attorney in the FBI's Office of General Counsel, where he worked on FISA applications and national security legal matters. He was directly involved in preparing the renewal of the FISA warrant against Carter Page.

In 2017, Clinesmith was tasked with verifying whether Carter Page had been a CIA source. After receiving confirmation that Page had, in fact, provided information to the CIA, Clinesmith altered an email to state the opposite—that Page was "not a source."

This falsified information was then used to support the third and final FISA warrant renewal.

Criminal Prosecution and Conviction

In August 2020, Clinesmith pleaded guilty to one count of making a false statement. He admitted to altering the CIA email and was sentenced in January 2021 to 12 months of probation and 400 hours of community service, but no prison time.

The case marked the first and only criminal conviction to arise from Special Counsel John Durham's investigation into the origins of the Russia probe.

Public and Institutional Fallout

Clinesmith's actions were condemned across the political spectrum as a serious breach of legal ethics and institutional trust. The DOJ Inspector General's 2019 report highlighted the falsified email as a key example of misconduct within the FBI.

Despite his conviction, Clinesmith's law license was later reinstated in Washington, D.C. This decision drew sharp criticism from legal experts and watchdog groups who argued that such leniency undermined the seriousness of falsifying court documents.

Significance

Kevin Clinesmith's misconduct directly contributed to the erosion of public trust in the FBI and the credibility of the FISA process. His case has been cited as evidence of systemic failures and the need for robust reform of intelligence-related legal procedures.

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His legacy is one of individual malfeasance with institutional consequences, serving as a stark reminder that even mid-level legal staff can profoundly impact national investigations.

Jeff Pierson

Lisa Page

Former FBI Attorney

Born: August 2, 1980
Position: Special Counsel to FBI Deputy Director Andrew McCabe

Role in FBI Investigations

Lisa Page served as a key legal advisor to Deputy Director Andrew McCabe and worked closely with Peter Strzok during both the Clinton email investigation and the Crossfire Hurricane probe.

She played a behind-the-scenes role in helping prepare the FBI's legal basis for FISA applications targeting Carter Page and provided input into the bureau's strategy regarding politically sensitive cases.

Her name came to public attention following the release of text messages between her and Peter Strzok, revealing personal and political commentary critical of Donald Trump.

Controversy and Departure

The content of the messages raised concerns about potential bias within the FBI and were cited repeatedly in congressional hearings and media investigations.

Lisa Page resigned from the FBI in May 2018. She later testified in closed-door congressional interviews that she believed the Russia investigation was warranted, but that she did not recall key events concerning the dossier's use in the FISA process.

Public Role and Lawsuit

Page filed a lawsuit against the DOJ and FBI in 2019 for alleged violations of the Privacy Act, citing the public release of her text messages and the personal attacks that followed. She has become a contributor to various media platforms and has spoken out in defense of her work.

Significance

Lisa Page's legal and advisory role placed her at the center of several pivotal FBI actions during the 2016 election season. Her personal messages, though never linked to operational misconduct, fed perceptions of internal FBI bias and contributed to public mistrust in the agency's political neutrality.

Her case highlights the blurred line between private opinion and institutional credibility when public servants handle high-stakes investigations.

Jeff Pierson

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Mark Warner

U.S. Senator from Virginia

Born: December 15, 1954
Education: George Washington University (B.A.); Harvard Law School (J.D.)

Career Background

Mark Warner has served as a U.S. Senator from Virginia since 2009 and is a leading Democratic voice on national security issues. He is the current Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and has played a central role in shaping intelligence policy and oversight.

Prior to his political career, Warner was a successful technology entrepreneur and venture capitalist. His business background has informed his legislative priorities in cybersecurity, innovation, and digital infrastructure.

Role in Intelligence Oversight and Trump Investigations

Warner was heavily involved in the Senate Intelligence Committee's bipartisan investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election. As Vice Chairman during much of the investigation, he emphasized the committee's findings that Russia attempted to aid Donald Trump's candidacy.

He supported the Crossfire Hurricane investigation and defended the FBI's approach, including the use of the Steele dossier. While he acknowledged flaws in how the dossier was handled, Warner consistently argued that the overall intelligence community assessment was valid.

Public Commentary on the Hunter Biden Laptop

Senator Warner echoed concerns from intelligence officials that the Hunter Biden laptop could have been part of a Russian disinformation effort. He has called for rigorous vetting of such materials and has supported transparency regarding FBI assessments, though he has not directly addressed later revelations that the laptop was verified as authentic in 2019.

Legislative Priorities

Warner has championed legislation related to:

- Election security and combating foreign interference.
- Oversight of technology platforms and misinformation.

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- Reforming FISA authorities to balance security and privacy.

He has positioned himself as a centrist, often working across the aisle while defending intelligence community operations.

Significance

Mark Warner's leadership in the Senate Intelligence Committee has made him a key voice in debates about election security, surveillance powers, and the balance between civil liberties and national defense. His support for the integrity of intelligence investigations into both Trump and Russia has made him a target for critics but a trusted ally among establishment Democrats and the national security community.

Jeff Pierson

Marc Elias

Election Law Attorney; Former General Counsel to the Clinton Campaign

Born: February 1, 1969
Education: Duke University (B.A.); Duke University School of Law (J.D.)

Career Background

Marc Elias is a high-profile Democratic attorney known for his work on election law and redistricting. He was the **General Counsel for Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign** and is the founder of the Elias Law Group and former partner at the prominent law firm **Perkins Coie**.

Elias has represented numerous Democratic candidates, political action committees, and organizations involved in election integrity litigation and voting rights expansion.

Role in the Steele Dossier and 2016 Election

During the 2016 campaign, Elias served as the point of contact between the Clinton campaign and **Fusion GPS**, the research firm that hired **Christopher Steele** to compile opposition research on Donald Trump's ties to Russia.

The payments to Fusion GPS were routed through **Perkins Coie**, allowing the campaign to distance itself from direct knowledge of the dossier's production. Elias maintained that the legal arrangement was standard opposition research.

While Elias has said he had limited knowledge of the dossier's contents at the time, congressional investigators and journalists noted that he helped set in motion the chain of events that brought the Steele dossier into the hands of the FBI and the media.

Congressional Testimony and Public Profile

Elias testified before Congress regarding his role in financing the dossier and stated that he did not direct or supervise Steele's work. His name came up repeatedly in Special Counsel **John Durham's** investigation, though he was not accused of wrongdoing.

Following the 2020 election, Elias led legal battles defending Democratic victories and voting procedures. He continues to be a divisive figure, hailed by some as a voting rights advocate and criticized by others for politicizing legal processes.

Significance

Marc Elias played a key but indirect role in the dissemination of the Steele dossier and in the Clinton campaign's broader legal strategy. His actions reflect how political campaigns

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use legal intermediaries to manage opposition research, particularly when that research intersects with national security and media narratives.

To critics, Elias's role raises ethical questions about transparency and political gamesmanship. To supporters, he is a skilled legal mind who defends electoral integrity and democratic participation.

Jeff Pierson

Merrick Garland

86th United States Attorney General

Born: November 13, 1952
Education: Harvard College (A.B.); Harvard Law School (J.D.)

Judicial and Legal Career

Merrick Garland served as a federal appellate judge for over two decades and was Chief Judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit from 2013 to 2020. In 2016, President Obama nominated him to the U.S. Supreme Court, but the Senate, controlled by Republicans, declined to hold hearings.

Garland was confirmed as U.S. Attorney General in March 2021 under President Joe Biden. His appointment was seen as an attempt to restore public trust in the Department of Justice following years of politically charged controversies.

Oversight and Investigative Decisions

As Attorney General, Garland oversaw the DOJ's responses to investigations involving both President Biden and former President Trump. He appointed **Robert Hur** as Special Counsel to examine Biden's handling of classified documents and **Jack Smith** to investigate Trump's retention of records and potential obstruction of justice.

Garland has insisted on impartiality and non-interference in prosecutorial decisions, despite political pressure from both parties. Critics on the right accuse him of selective enforcement, while critics on the left claim he has moved too slowly on investigations involving Trump.

Significance

Garland's approach to law enforcement has emphasized institutional integrity, rule of law, and a return to norms. However, his role in appointing special counsels and managing high-stakes legal inquiries places him at the center of national debates over fairness, transparency, and justice.

His biography is essential to understanding how current and former DOJ leaders have navigated the overlapping pressures of legal independence, political expectations, and public trust.

Jeff Pierson

Michael E. Horowitz

Inspector General, U.S. Department of Justice (2012–Present)

Born: September 19, 1962
Education: Brandeis University (B.A.); Harvard Law School (J.D.)

Background and Appointment

Michael Horowitz is the long-serving Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Justice, appointed by President Obama in 2012. He previously worked as a federal prosecutor and served on the U.S. Sentencing Commission. As Inspector General, Horowitz is responsible for conducting independent oversight of DOJ operations, including the FBI.

Oversight of Crossfire Hurricane

Horowitz conducted a comprehensive review of the FBI's actions in the Crossfire Hurricane investigation, releasing a 434-page report in December 2019 titled *Review of Four FISA Applications and Other Aspects of the FBI's Crossfire Hurricane Investigation*.

The report found 17 significant errors and omissions in the FBI's FISA applications to surveil Trump campaign advisor Carter Page. These included failures to disclose exculpatory evidence and the unreliability of the Steele dossier, which was central to the warrants.

Horowitz criticized the FBI's handling of confidential human sources, the lack of oversight, and the inaccurate portrayal of Steele's credibility. He concluded that the FBI failed to uphold its obligations to the FISA Court.

Findings on Brian Auten and FBI Officials

Horowitz specifically named Brian Auten, a supervisory intelligence analyst, for his role in verifying the Steele dossier. Auten was faulted for failing to incorporate critical information about the unreliability of Steele's sources and for withholding exculpatory evidence from the FISA process.

The report also highlighted shortcomings by senior FBI officials, including James Comey, Andrew McCabe, and Peter Strzok, although Horowitz stated that he did not find evidence of political bias as the primary motivation.

Reaction and Controversy

While some viewed the Horowitz report as a condemnation of FBI practices, others criticized it for failing to connect the misconduct to broader institutional or political

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motives. Critics, including Attorney General Bill Barr and U.S. Attorney John Durham, argued that Horowitz understated the seriousness of the abuses.

Despite these criticisms, Horowitz's report prompted reforms to FISA procedures and triggered internal disciplinary actions within the FBI.

Significance

Michael Horowitz remains one of the few DOJ officials broadly trusted by both parties for his thorough and impartial investigations. His report on Crossfire Hurricane stands as a landmark document exposing systemic breakdowns in FBI accountability and serves as a foundation for further inquiry by Special Counsel Durham.

His work demonstrates the essential role of independent oversight in preserving the integrity of federal institutions.

Jeff Pierson

Michael Isikoff

Investigative Journalist; Chief Investigative Correspondent at Yahoo News

Born: 1952
Education: Washington University in St. Louis; Northwestern University (M.S. in Journalism)

Career Background

Michael Isikoff is a prominent investigative journalist with decades of experience covering politics, national security, and government corruption. He is currently the **chief investigative correspondent at Yahoo News** and co-author of the books *Hubris* and *Russian Roulette*. He has previously reported for *Newsweek* and *NBC News*.

Reporting on Trump-Russia Allegations

Isikoff authored a pivotal article in September 2016 that was based on briefings from intelligence sources referencing the **Steele dossier**, although not explicitly naming it. The piece detailed suspicions about Trump campaign aide **Carter Page** and alleged meetings with Russian officials.

This article became one of the evidentiary cornerstones cited in the **FISA warrant application** against Page—raising controversy over the sourcing and reliability of the claims.

Role in Dossier Dissemination

It was later revealed that Christopher Steele had personally met with Isikoff prior to the publication of the article. Critics contend that this created a feedback loop wherein Steele's own unverified claims were used by the FBI as corroborating media evidence.

Isikoff has since expressed skepticism about aspects of the Steele dossier, acknowledging that some of its more salacious allegations had not been verified and that the document was ultimately flawed.

Significance

Michael Isikoff's early reporting helped bring the dossier's content into broader circulation among journalists, lawmakers, and the public. His story influenced key surveillance decisions by the FBI and helped frame Carter Page as a national security concern.

While not the first to report on Russia-Trump ties, Isikoff's work was among the most impactful in legitimizing Steele's narrative during the 2016 election. He later played a

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reflective role in reassessing the media's treatment of the dossier in the light of further investigations.

Isikoff remains a respected figure in investigative journalism, but his work on the dossier continues to be scrutinized as part of broader questions about media responsibility and the relationship between the press and intelligence sources.

Jeff Pierson

Natasha Bertrand

Journalist; National Security and Intelligence Correspondent

Born: May 5, 1992
Education: Vassar College (B.A. in Political Science and Philosophy); London School of Economics (M.Sc.)

Career Background

Natasha Bertrand is a journalist known for her national security and intelligence reporting. She has worked at **Business Insider**, **The Atlantic**, **Politico**, and currently serves as a correspondent for **CNN** covering the intelligence community and the Pentagon.

She gained prominence during the Trump administration for her frequent reporting on developments related to Russia, the Steele dossier, and U.S. intelligence operations.

Coverage of Steele Dossier and Trump Investigations

Bertrand was one of the most active journalists covering the **Trump–Russia** investigation, regularly reporting on leaks, intelligence findings, and developments tied to **Christopher Steele**, **Fusion GPS**, and the **Mueller probe**.

Critics argue she uncritically repeated unverified claims derived from the **Steele dossier**, helping to normalize a politically charged narrative. Bertrand's defenders counter that she was reporting in real time based on available intelligence and official briefings.

Role in Hunter Biden Laptop Controversy

Bertrand was among the first journalists to report on the October 2020 open letter from **51 former intelligence officials** asserting that the **Hunter Biden laptop** story had the hallmarks of a Russian disinformation operation. Her reporting contributed to the widespread media framing of the laptop as potentially compromised by foreign actors.

This framing was later challenged by evidence showing the FBI had authenticated the laptop by late 2019. Nonetheless, her reporting was influential in shaping tech platform and public responses ahead of the 2020 election.

Significance

Natasha Bertrand's reporting played a prominent role in two of the most politically sensitive intelligence-related controversies in recent history: the **Steele dossier** and the **Hunter Biden laptop** story. Her work reflects the increasing influence of national security reporters in shaping public understanding of classified and politically sensitive material.

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To critics, Bertrand embodies the risks of overreliance on anonymous sources and premature conclusions. To supporters, she is a diligent journalist covering difficult and rapidly evolving stories under extraordinary public scrutiny.

Her case illustrates how journalists can become central figures in political battles over truth, intelligence, and the First Amendment.

Jeff Pierson

Nellie Ohr

Russia Analyst and Contractor for Fusion GPS

Born: 1960s
Education: Harvard University (B.A.); Stanford University (Ph.D. in Russian History)

Academic and Professional Background

Nellie Ohr is a Russian history expert and fluent Russian speaker who has worked in various research and academic roles. She earned her Ph.D. in Russian history from Stanford University and has published scholarly work on Soviet governance and post-Soviet transitions.

In 2016, she was hired as an independent contractor by Fusion GPS, the same firm that employed Christopher Steele and was retained by the Clinton campaign and DNC to investigate Donald Trump.

Work with Fusion GPS

At Fusion GPS, Nellie Ohr was tasked with conducting open-source research on Donald Trump's connections to Russian business and political figures. Her work was not part of the Steele dossier directly, but it informed the broader opposition research effort being compiled by Fusion GPS.

Nellie's involvement came under intense scrutiny because her husband, Bruce Ohr, was a senior DOJ official who acted as an informal conduit between Steele and the FBI after the bureau formally cut ties with Steele.

Congressional Testimony and Public Scrutiny

Nellie Ohr testified before the House Oversight and Judiciary Committees in 2018, where she detailed her work at Fusion GPS and denied having knowledge of her husband's interactions with Steele at the time.

While no evidence has emerged showing she directly passed intelligence to the DOJ or FBI, critics argue that her role created at minimum the appearance of a conflict of interest, and potentially a backchannel for politically motivated intelligence.

Significance

Nellie Ohr's professional ties to Fusion GPS during the 2016 election cycle place her at the nexus of opposition research, political influence operations, and DOJ decision-making. Her case demonstrates how overlapping personal and professional relationships can complicate the integrity of high-stakes federal investigations.

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While never charged or formally reprimanded, her role remains a cautionary tale in the need for transparency and firewall protections in politically sensitive investigations.

Jeff Pierson

Michael Sussmann

Former DOJ Attorney; Partner at Perkins Coie Law Firm

Born: c. 1964
Education: Tulane University (B.A.); Brooklyn Law School (J.D.)

Background and Legal Career

Michael Sussmann is a former federal prosecutor who became a cybersecurity and national security attorney with the Washington, D.C.–based law firm Perkins Coie. He was a partner in the firm's privacy and security group and frequently represented clients before the DOJ, FBI, and other intelligence agencies.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, Sussmann acted as legal counsel for the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Hillary Clinton's campaign, particularly during the response to the DNC email hacks.

Role in Trump–Russia Allegations

Sussmann became a key figure in the investigation into the origins of the Trump–Russia narrative. In September 2016, he met with FBI General Counsel James Baker and presented data alleging a covert communications channel between the Trump Organization and a Russian bank (Alfa Bank). He reportedly did not disclose that he was acting on behalf of the Clinton campaign.

Durham Investigation and Trial

Sussmann was indicted in September 2021 by Special Counsel John Durham for allegedly making a false statement to the FBI by hiding his relationship with the Clinton campaign. The indictment claimed Sussmann's actions were part of an effort to use federal agencies for political ends.

In May 2022, Sussmann went to trial and was acquitted by a jury. The jury found that the prosecution failed to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Sussmann intentionally misled the FBI.

Significance

Sussmann's case was central to Durham's broader claim that intelligence and legal channels were manipulated to damage Trump politically. While he was not convicted, his actions exemplify the ethical gray zones of partisan legal work intersecting with law enforcement. His biography remains a flashpoint in debates about political lawfare, attorney conduct, and FBI susceptibility to outside influence.

Jeff Pierson

Perkins Coie LLP

Democratic-Linked Law Firm Involved in Funding the Steele Dossier

Founded: 1912
Headquarters: Seattle, Washington
Specialties: Political law, election law, government affairs, litigation, corporate law

Role in the Steele Dossier and 2016 Election

Perkins Coie is a major U.S. law firm with deep ties to the Democratic Party, serving as outside counsel to the Democratic National Committee (DNC), the Hillary Clinton presidential campaign, and numerous Democratic candidates and progressive organizations.

In 2016, Perkins Coie retained the opposition research firm Fusion GPS on behalf of the DNC and the Clinton campaign. This engagement led to the creation of the Steele dossier, which was compiled by former British intelligence officer Christopher Steele. The payments for this research were funneled through Perkins Coie, making the law firm the legal and financial conduit for the dossier's development.

Though the arrangement was kept secret at the time, it was later revealed through reporting and congressional inquiries. This concealed connection between a presidential campaign and a document used to justify FBI surveillance sparked major controversy, particularly because the FBI did not fully disclose the partisan funding origins when presenting Steele's work to the FISA court.

Key Individuals

Marc Elias

- **Position:** Partner at Perkins Coie (until 2021); Head of the firm's Political Law Group
- **Role:** Served as general counsel for the Clinton campaign and was responsible for hiring Fusion GPS on the campaign's behalf. Elias testified that he was aware of Steele's involvement and received updates on the opposition research. He has since founded The Elias Law Group, continuing political law work for Democratic clients.
- **Significance:** Central figure in directing the flow of funding to Fusion GPS. Criticized for concealing the political origins of the dossier funding during key legal proceedings and media interactions.

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Michael Sussmann

- **Position:** Former Partner at Perkins Coie; cybersecurity law specialist
- **Role:** Met with FBI General Counsel James Baker in September 2016 and presented data alleging covert communications between the Trump Organization and Russia-based Alfa Bank. He allegedly failed to disclose that he was acting on behalf of a political client.
- Legal Outcome: Indicted by Special Counsel John Durham in 2021 for making false statements to the FBI. He was acquitted in 2022 by a jury in Washington, D.C., though the trial revealed internal coordination among Perkins Coie, Fusion GPS, and Clinton campaign staff.

Controversy and Criticism

The firm's involvement in funding the Steele dossier and facilitating related contacts with the FBI has been widely criticized by congressional investigators, media watchdogs, and legal analysts. The main critiques center on:

- The lack of disclosure regarding political motivations behind the dossier
- The use of legal intermediaries to shield political operations from scrutiny
- The blurring of lines between campaign activity and intelligence-gathering

Significance

Perkins Coie played a pivotal role in the creation and deployment of the Steele dossier, which became a central piece of the Crossfire Hurricane investigation. Its key partners directly participated in actions that contributed to the FBI's initiation of surveillance, the spread of unverified intelligence, and misrepresentation of political motives to government agencies. The firm's involvement is a critical example of how legal structures were used to enable and obscure partisan operations that had significant national and institutional consequences.

Jeff Pierson

Peter Strzok

Former Deputy Assistant Director, FBI Counterintelligence Division

Born: 1970s
Education: Georgetown University (B.A., M.A. in International Affairs)

Background and FBI Role

Peter Strzok served as the **Deputy Assistant Director** of the FBI's Counterintelligence Division and played a **leading role in both the Clinton email investigation (Midyear Exam)** and the **Trump-Russia investigation (Crossfire Hurricane)**. He was a senior agent assigned to evaluate national security risks related to foreign influence.

Strzok was one of the **lead agents who interviewed Michael Flynn** and **initiated the opening of the Russia investigation** in July 2016. He was also deeply involved in the **FISA warrant applications** targeting Carter Page.

Controversy and Text Message Scandal

Strzok became the subject of national controversy when **text messages between him and FBI attorney Lisa Page** were released, revealing personal bias against Donald Trump and disparaging remarks about Trump voters. These texts raised significant concerns about the **impartiality** of high-level FBI personnel.

In one notable exchange, Strzok reassured Page that "we'll stop" Trump from becoming president. Critics cited this as evidence of institutional bias, while Strzok and Page later argued their communications were personal and did not affect investigative decisions.

Congressional Testimony and Dismissal

Strzok testified in highly publicized hearings before the House Judiciary and Oversight Committees in 2018, where he defended the FBI's integrity but acknowledged the inappropriateness of his private communications.

He was **removed from Special Counsel Robert Mueller's team** in 2017 and later **terminated from the FBI** in August 2018 following a recommendation by the Office of Professional Responsibility.

Post-FBI Activity

Since leaving the FBI, Strzok has become a vocal public commentator, authoring the book "Compromised: Counterintelligence and the Threat of Donald J. Trump" and contributing to media coverage of intelligence issues.

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Significance

Strzok remains one of the most controversial figures in the Trump-Russia investigations. To critics, he represents political bias within the intelligence community; to defenders, he is a scapegoat for broader systemic failings. His actions and communications continue to shape the public's perception of **FBI neutrality and professionalism**.

Jeff Pierson

Richard Burr

Former U.S. Senator from North Carolina

Born: November 30, 1955
Education: Wake Forest University (B.A.)

Career Background

Richard Burr served as a U.S. Senator from North Carolina from 2005 to 2023. Prior to that, he was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1995 to 2005. A Republican, Burr was widely regarded as a pragmatic and steady legislator with a deep interest in intelligence, national security, and health policy.

He served as Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee from 2015 to 2020, overseeing the committee's work on Russian election interference and other major intelligence issues.

Role in Trump-Russia Investigations

As Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Burr led the committee's extensive bipartisan investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election. His leadership was marked by an effort to insulate the investigation from partisan influence.

While the committee concluded that Russia did seek to aid Trump's campaign, Burr's team did not endorse the more explosive claims of direct coordination between Trump associates and Russian operatives. He supported the intelligence community's overall assessment of foreign interference.

Stance on Crossfire Hurricane and FBI Conduct

Burr took a more reserved approach than some of his Republican colleagues when addressing the Crossfire Hurricane investigation and the Steele dossier. While he raised concerns about FISA abuse and information vetting, he often emphasized the need for thorough and impartial oversight rather than public condemnation.

His tenure on the Intelligence Committee was defined by a commitment to maintaining the committee's credibility amid a deeply polarized political environment.

Hunter Biden Laptop

Burr did not take a leading role in public discussions about the Hunter Biden laptop. However, his committee oversaw aspects of election security and information integrity during the 2020 election cycle, which included scrutiny of disinformation risks.

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Post-Senate

After retiring from the Senate, Burr joined the private sector and has remained a commentator on intelligence and national security issues. He is viewed as an example of measured leadership in an era of partisan intensity.

Significance

Richard Burr's work helped shape the Senate's official record on foreign interference and the limitations of the intelligence community's capabilities and conduct. His bipartisan approach provided a contrast to more polarized figures and contributed to preserving the Senate Intelligence Committee's institutional legitimacy.

Jeff Pierson

Robby Mook

Democratic Political Strategist and Former Campaign Manager for Hillary Clinton (2016)

Born: December 3, 1979
Education: Columbia University (B.A. in Classics)

Career Background

Robby Mook is a seasoned Democratic campaign strategist known for managing Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign. He previously served as executive director of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) and held leadership roles in campaigns for Howard Dean and Jeanne Shaheen.

Mook gained a reputation for his data-driven approach to politics and was brought into Clinton's 2016 campaign with the aim of building a modern, analytics-focused electoral operation.

Role in the Steele Dossier and Alfa-Bank Allegations

While Mook was not directly involved in commissioning the **Steele dossier**, he was part of the leadership that approved broader opposition research efforts that eventually funneled into **Fusion GPS** through the law firm **Perkins Coie**. The Clinton campaign and the **Democratic National Committee (DNC)** jointly funded the research project through legal intermediaries.

Mook later testified under oath during the **Sussmann trial** that Hillary Clinton personally approved the decision to share information with the press about a supposed secret communication channel between the Trump Organization and Russia's Alfa-Bank—a claim later debunked.

Public Testimony and Fallout

In his May 2022 testimony, Mook stated that he and others in the campaign were aware that the Alfa-Bank claims had not been verified before pushing the narrative to media outlets. His admission added weight to accusations that the campaign used unverified intelligence to influence public perception during the election.

Despite criticism, Mook maintained that the campaign acted within acceptable political norms, and that exposing potentially compromising ties was in the public interest.

Significance

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Robby Mook's role highlights how opposition research and media strategy can intersect with national intelligence and law enforcement processes. While not directly responsible for investigative misconduct, his leadership in disseminating politically explosive (and ultimately discredited) material helped shape the climate of suspicion and partisan divide surrounding Trump's candidacy.

His testimony also illustrates how key campaign decisions—particularly regarding narrative control—can reverberate through federal institutions, media ecosystems, and public trust in democratic processes.

Jeff Pierson

Robert Hur

Special Counsel, U.S. Department of Justice

Born: circa 1973
Education: Harvard University (B.A.); Stanford Law School (J.D.)

Background and Career

Robert Hur is a seasoned federal prosecutor and former U.S. Attorney for the District of Maryland. He was appointed as **Special Counsel** by **Attorney General Merrick Garland** in January 2023 to investigate the handling of classified documents discovered in President Joe Biden's former office and residence.

Hur has served in both Republican and Democratic administrations. Earlier in his career, he clerked for **Chief Justice William Rehnquist** of the U.S. Supreme Court and worked in the DOJ's Criminal Division before becoming U.S. Attorney.

Reputation and Investigatory Mandate

Hur is regarded as a serious, impartial legal professional. His appointment was widely seen as an effort to maintain public confidence in the DOJ's handling of politically sensitive investigations involving high-ranking officials.

Though not directly involved in the Steele dossier or Crossfire Hurricane, Hur's special counsel role intersects with many of the same themes of document handling, political accountability, and DOJ integrity that underpin the controversies involving figures such as Brian Auten.

Significance

Hur's ongoing investigation into President Biden's retention of classified materials reflects the growing demand for impartiality and transparency in federal oversight. His biography serves as a contemporary benchmark against which the actions of previous DOJ and FBI actors are now being measured.

Hur's conduct and conclusions may influence future institutional reforms, especially as the public scrutinizes how political affiliations and power dynamics affect prosecutorial discretion and investigative priorities.

Jeff Pierson

Robert Mueller

Special Counsel, U.S. Department of Justice (2017–2019); Former FBI Director (2001–2013)

Born: August 7, 1944
Education: Princeton University (B.A.); New York University (M.A.); University of Virginia School of Law (J.D.)

Background and Career

Robert S. Mueller III served as FBI Director from 2001 to 2013, appointed by President George W. Bush and later extended by President Barack Obama. A Marine Corps veteran and seasoned federal prosecutor, Mueller led the Bureau through the post-9/11 era, significantly expanding counterterrorism efforts and agency modernization.

Following his tenure, he returned to private practice until his appointment in May 2017 as **Special Counsel** to oversee the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. election and related matters, including any coordination between the Trump campaign and Russian actors.

Special Counsel Investigation

The Mueller investigation resulted in **over 30 indictments**, including foreign nationals, Trump associates, and companies linked to Russian intelligence operations. Notable figures charged or convicted included **Paul Manafort**, **Rick Gates**, **Michael Flynn**, and **George Papadopoulos**.

In March 2019, Mueller submitted a 448-page report to Attorney General William Barr. The report found **insufficient evidence to establish a criminal conspiracy** between the Trump campaign and Russia, but **outlined multiple episodes of possible obstruction of justice** by President Trump.

Testimony and Legacy

Mueller's July 2019 congressional testimony was subdued and offered few new revelations, disappointing both parties. Nevertheless, his report became a foundational document in the debate over presidential accountability, foreign interference, and limits of executive power.

While critics claimed the investigation lacked finality, supporters pointed to its prosecutorial rigor and its revelations about Russian cyber operations and the need for reform in campaign oversight.

Jeff Pierson

Significance

Robert Mueller's work profoundly shaped the national dialogue around electoral integrity, foreign interference, and executive behavior. Though politically polarizing, his investigation uncovered substantial misconduct and catalyzed ongoing debates about the structure and accountability of intelligence and law enforcement institutions.

Jeff Pierson

Rodney Joffe

Tech Executive and Internet Security Expert; Former Neustar Executive

Born: Circa 1950s
Education: Information not publicly confirmed

Career Background

Rodney Joffe is a South African-born American technology executive with decades of experience in internet infrastructure and cybersecurity. He was the Senior Vice President and Security CTO at Neustar, a major domain name registry and data analytics firm, and served on U.S. government cybersecurity advisory panels.

He became widely known due to his role in the Alfa-Bank allegations—the claim that there was a covert communication channel between Donald Trump's organization and a Russian bank, which was later discredited by federal investigators.

Role in the Alfa-Bank Allegations

Joffe allegedly exploited his access to proprietary DNS data through a government contract to analyze traffic involving Trump-related servers. He then shared the results with **Michael Sussmann**, a Perkins Coie lawyer, who passed the information to the FBI.

Though Joffe reportedly expected a cybersecurity role in a potential Clinton administration, he positioned himself as a concerned citizen. His analysis, however, was later criticized for being misleading or misinterpreted.

According to Special Counsel John Durham's investigation, Joffe instructed researchers to "create an inference" about suspicious communications even when lacking supporting evidence.

Legal Scrutiny

Joffe was never criminally charged but was named in court filings related to the Sussmann trial as a key figure in disseminating the Alfa-Bank data. His involvement was portrayed as part of a broader effort to feed unverified claims to the FBI and the media in an attempt to politically damage Trump.

He resigned from Neustar in 2021 following public revelations of his role in the investigation.

Significance

Jeff Pierson

Rodney Joffe represents the intersection of cybersecurity expertise and political controversy. His role demonstrates how access to sensitive data can influence high-stakes political narratives. Critics argue his actions blurred national security concerns with opposition research. Defenders maintain he aimed to expose genuine anomalies.

His case underscores the complexities of data, influence, and accountability in the digital age.

Jeff Pierson

Rod Rosenstein

Former Deputy Attorney General, U.S. Department of Justice

Born: January 13, 1965
Education: University of Pennsylvania (B.S.); Harvard Law School (J.D.)

Career Overview

Rod Rosenstein served as the U.S. Deputy Attorney General from April 2017 to May 2019. A career prosecutor with a reputation for being detail-oriented and apolitical, Rosenstein was thrust into the national spotlight during one of the most turbulent eras in DOJ history.

Prior to his appointment as Deputy AG, Rosenstein served as the U.S. Attorney for the District of Maryland under both Republican and Democratic administrations.

Oversight of the Russia Investigation

When Jeff Sessions recused himself from the Russia investigation, Rosenstein assumed responsibility for overseeing the probe. In May 2017, he appointed Robert Mueller as Special Counsel to investigate Russian interference in the 2016 election and potential links to the Trump campaign.

Rosenstein defended Mueller's integrity and shielded the investigation from outside political pressure, even amid intense scrutiny from President Trump and Republican lawmakers. He signed off on multiple key legal decisions, including FISA warrant renewals.

Relationship with the White House

Despite initial support from Trump, Rosenstein's relationship with the president deteriorated due to his defense of Mueller and his refusal to limit the scope of the investigation.

In 2018, reports surfaced that Rosenstein had discussed secretly recording the president and invoking the 25th Amendment — claims he denied. Though Trump considered firing him, Rosenstein ultimately remained in office until May 2019.

Legacy and Significance

Rosenstein's role in managing the Mueller investigation placed him at the center of the national debate over the independence of the Department of Justice. He attempted to balance institutional integrity with loyalty to the administration that appointed him.

His tenure is often seen as emblematic of the complex legal and ethical challenges faced by career officials during periods of extreme political polarization.

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Ron Johnson

U.S. Senator from Wisconsin

Born: April 8, 1955
Education: University of Minnesota (B.A.)

Career Background

Ron Johnson has served as the U.S. Senator from Wisconsin since 2011. Prior to entering politics, he was a businessman and accountant. Johnson has positioned himself as a fiscal conservative with a focus on reducing government overreach, increasing transparency, and protecting constitutional liberties.

He serves on several key Senate committees, including the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, where he has chaired and participated in investigations into federal agency conduct and election-related issues.

Involvement in Crossfire Hurricane and FBI Oversight

Senator Johnson has been an outspoken critic of the FBI's handling of the **Crossfire Hurricane** investigation and the use of the **Steele dossier**. He has participated in oversight hearings and authored letters questioning the decision-making of FBI and DOJ officials.

He emphasized the potential for politically motivated investigations to undermine public confidence in federal institutions, and has supported efforts to release classified documents related to the Trump–Russia investigation.

Hunter Biden Laptop Investigations

Johnson played a prominent role in the Senate's review of the **Hunter Biden laptop** and associated foreign business dealings. He co-authored reports with Senator Grassley documenting apparent efforts within the FBI to downplay or misrepresent the laptop's contents.

He has also raised concerns about censorship by social media platforms and the coordination between federal officials and private entities to suppress the story in advance of the 2020 election.

Significance

Ron Johnson's role in uncovering perceived bias and lack of transparency within federal law enforcement has made him a key figure in Republican efforts to reform the FBI and DOJ. His focus on oversight and whistleblower testimony has added to the body of evidence challenging the impartiality of several high-profile investigations.

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His work continues to influence legislative efforts to increase government accountability, particularly in matters involving intelligence and law enforcement agencies.

Jeff Pierson

Rudy Giuliani

Former Mayor of New York City; Personal Attorney to President Donald Trump

Born: May 28, 1944
Education: Manhattan College (B.A.); New York University School of Law (J.D.)

Career Background

Rudy Giuliani first rose to national prominence as a U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, where he prosecuted high-profile cases involving organized crime and political corruption. He later became Mayor of New York City (1994–2001) and was widely praised for his leadership during the September 11 attacks.

After his mayoral tenure, Giuliani remained active in politics and law. In 2018, he joined President Donald Trump's legal team during the Mueller investigation and subsequent congressional probes.

Role in Ukraine and Election Controversies

Giuliani became a central figure in the Trump-Ukraine scandal, in which he attempted to pressure Ukrainian officials to launch investigations into Hunter Biden and the 2016 election. His outreach to Ukrainian contacts and coordination with State Department figures played a prominent role in the first impeachment of Donald Trump.

He was also one of the most vocal figures challenging the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election, promoting legal theories and allegations of fraud that were widely dismissed in court.

Giuliani's access to the Hunter Biden laptop and role in its public release became part of broader discussions around foreign interference, election misinformation, and media suppression.

Legal Troubles and Public Perception

Giuliani has faced increasing legal scrutiny, including federal investigations into his dealings in Ukraine, and ethics probes related to his conduct during the 2020 election aftermath.

In 2021, federal agents raided his apartment and office as part of a criminal investigation. In 2023, he faced disciplinary actions and lawsuits tied to his post-election conduct and representation of Donald Trump.

Significance

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Rudy Giuliani's evolution from celebrated public servant to controversial political figure is emblematic of the broader political realignment surrounding Donald Trump. His actions played a direct role in shaping the narratives around the Hunter Biden investigation, impeachment, and electoral legitimacy.

To critics, Giuliani represents a distortion of legal norms and the misuse of law for political ends. To supporters, he is seen as a loyal defender of the president and a warrior against what they perceive as establishment corruption.

His legacy is likely to remain sharply divided along partisan lines, but his influence on the national conversation and political discourse is undeniable.

Jeff Pierson

Sidney Blumenthal

Political Operative; Former Aide to President Bill Clinton; Longtime Clinton Family Advisor

Born: November 6, 1948
Education: Brandeis University (B.A. in Sociology)

Career Background

Sidney Blumenthal is a political journalist, author, and longtime confidant to the **Clinton family**. He served as **Assistant to the President** during the Clinton administration and remained a key advisor to **Hillary Clinton**, particularly during her tenure as Secretary of State and her 2016 presidential campaign.

Prior to his political work, Blumenthal was a journalist at outlets including *The New Republic*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New Yorker*, where he built a reputation for analytical and partisan commentary.

Role in Political Intelligence and Narrative Framing

Though not directly linked to the **Steele dossier**, Blumenthal's name appears in discussions surrounding **Clinton-aligned intelligence efforts** and **opposition research**. During the **Benghazi investigation**, he was identified as an informal advisor sending intelligence memos to Secretary Clinton through unofficial channels.

Blumenthal has been associated with efforts to amplify negative narratives about Trump and other political opponents. Some investigative reports have suggested indirect links or coordination with entities connected to **Fusion GPS**, although concrete evidence remains limited.

Controversies and Investigations

Blumenthal was frequently cited by Republican investigators as emblematic of the blurred line between informal influence and institutional policy. His advisory role, lack of formal title, and involvement in sensitive communications during the Clinton years attracted scrutiny from Congress.

In the Russia investigation context, Blumenthal's relevance is largely symbolic—representing the broader network of political actors who shaped media and intelligence narratives during the election cycles.

Significance

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Sidney Blumenthal's biography reflects the enduring influence of political operatives who move between journalism, advisory roles, and intelligence adjacent circles. While never formally charged or implicated in wrongdoing, his methods and proximity to the Clinton apparatus have made him a lightning rod in debates about shadow influence, narrative control, and partisan entrenchment.

To critics, Blumenthal exemplifies the entrenchment of political spin in public policy. To defenders, he is a loyal advisor and seasoned strategist navigating a hostile political environment.

His continued presence in major political scandals illustrates how non-elected advisors can wield significant behind-the-scenes influence.

Jeff Pierson

Tony Bobulinski

Business Executive; Former Partner of Hunter Biden in SinoHawk Holdings

Born: 1972 (estimated)
Education: Pennsylvania State University (B.S.)

Career Background

Tony Bobulinski is a former naval officer and private equity executive who became a high-profile whistleblower in 2020 due to his business ties with Hunter Biden and James Biden, the brother of President Joe Biden.

Bobulinski co-founded SinoHawk Holdings, a joint venture that aimed to partner with CEFC China Energy, a Chinese energy conglomerate with close ties to the Chinese Communist Party. The venture was designed to pursue infrastructure and energy deals globally, with Hunter Biden allegedly acting as a key point of contact.

Allegations and Testimony

In October 2020, Bobulinski publicly alleged that Joe Biden was aware of, and possibly profited from, his family's foreign business dealings—an accusation supported, he claimed, by emails, texts, and documents found on Hunter Biden's laptop. He also stated that he met with Joe Biden in 2017 to discuss business matters—contradicting President Biden's repeated denials of knowledge regarding his son's foreign activities.

Bobulinski provided materials to the FBI, Senate Homeland Security Committee, and Senate Finance Committee. He participated in interviews and made media appearances asserting that the Bidens engaged in deceptive and potentially compromising business arrangements.

Public Reaction and Media Coverage

Bobulinski's claims were polarizing. Conservative media outlets amplified his accusations and framed him as a credible whistleblower. Legacy media and some fact-checkers questioned the timing, sourcing, and motivations behind the allegations—especially given their proximity to the 2020 presidential election.

Tech platforms initially suppressed related reporting, citing disinformation risks. The FBI has confirmed possession of Bobulinski's evidence but has not publicly corroborated or refuted his specific allegations.

Significance

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Tony Bobulinski's role in the Hunter Biden saga remains central to Republican claims of Biden family corruption and alleged foreign influence. His detailed documentation and willingness to testify under oath have been used to support broader calls for congressional investigations and special counsel oversight.

To critics, his statements are unverified and politically motivated. To supporters, he represents a rare insider willing to challenge one of America's most powerful political families.

Regardless of interpretation, Bobulinski's involvement has deepened public concern over transparency, foreign entanglements, and the intersection of family business and political office.

Jeff Pierson

William Barr

Former Attorney General of the United States

Born: May 23, 1950
Education: Columbia University (B.A., M.A.); George Washington University Law School (J.D.)

Background and DOJ Tenure

William Pelham Barr served twice as U.S. Attorney General — first under President George H. W. Bush (1991–1993) and later under President Donald Trump (2019–2020). A staunch constitutional originalist, Barr was known for his expansive view of executive power and his critiques of overreaching bureaucracy.

During his second term as AG, Barr oversaw the conclusion of the Mueller investigation, managed the Department of Justice's handling of FISA reform, and played a key role in initiating the Durham investigation into the origins of the Trump-Russia probe.

Role in Intelligence Oversight and Controversies

Barr was highly critical of how the Crossfire Hurricane investigation was handled, calling the surveillance of Trump campaign members "a travesty." Under his direction, U.S. Attorney John Durham was appointed to investigate potential abuses in the FBI and DOJ.

He also authorized the review and declassification of key intelligence documents, asserting the public had a right to know the basis of federal actions taken during and after the 2016 election.

Barr was vocal in condemning the actions of officials involved in perpetuating the Steele dossier and raised concerns about the FBI's vetting process for FISA warrants. He also commented on the Hunter Biden laptop issue, saying DOJ did not interfere with the case but criticizing how it was downplayed publicly.

Resignation and Public Statements

Barr resigned in December 2020 after tensions with President Trump over election-related disputes. In his resignation letter, he reiterated confidence in the integrity of the DOJ but also cautioned about politicization within law enforcement.

Since leaving office, Barr has written a memoir (*One Damn Thing After Another*) and has defended many of his DOJ actions in interviews, while also distancing himself from Trump's post-election conduct.

Significance

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William Barr played a pivotal role in restoring internal scrutiny to the DOJ after the Crossfire Hurricane controversy. His critics argue he used his position to protect the executive branch, while supporters believe he sought to reinstate legal boundaries and transparency in politically charged investigations.

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Reference: Tradecraft Review 2016 ICA on Election Interference

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

CIA NOTE

26 June 2025

(U) **Memo To:**	**Director of the Central Intelligence Agency**
(U) **From:**	**Deputy Director of CIA for Analysis**
(U) **Subject:**	**Tradecraft Review of the 2016 Intelligence Community Assessment on Russian Election Interference**
(U) **Reference:**	***Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA), Russia's Influence Campaign Targeting the 2016 US Presidential Election*, 30 December 2016**

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(U) In May 2025, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (DCIA) John Ratcliffe tasked CIA's Directorate of Analysis (DA) to conduct a lessons-learned review of the procedures and analytic tradecraft employed in the highest classified version of the Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA) *Russia's Influence Campaign Targeting the 2016 US Presidential Election*, dated 30 December 2016. The review focused particular attention on the ICA's most debated judgment that Russian President Vladimir Putin "aspired" to help then-candidate Donald Trump win the election. Drawing on CIA materials provided to congressional oversight investigations, the DA examined whether any procedural anomalies or tradecraft weaknesses may have affected the soundness and objectivity of this key judgment and the overall assessment.

(U) ICA Origins and Context

(U) To understand the procedural and tradecraft issues identified in this review, it is essential to examine the politically charged environment and unique circumstances that led to the ICA's development in late 2016. During this period, conflicting public and private statements by Intelligence Community (IC) officials about Russia's role in the US presidential election created confusion about the IC's actual assessment. These contradictory messages prompted President Obama on 6 December to direct then-Director of National Intelligence (DNI) James Clapper to conduct a comprehensive review of all available intelligence and provide the IC's best assessment of Russian activities related to the election.

- (U) However, before work on the assessment even began, media leaks suggesting that the IC had already reached definitive conclusions risked creating an anchoring bias.

- (U) On 9 December, both the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* reported the IC had concluded with high confidence that Russia had intervened specifically to help Trump win the election. The *Post* cited an unnamed US official describing this as the IC's "consensus view."

(U) Procedural Concerns

(U) The DA Review identified multiple procedural anomalies in the preparation of the ICA. These included a highly compressed production timeline, stringent compartmentation, and excessive involvement of agency heads, all of which led to

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(U//~~FOUO~~) This product reflects a CIA perspective and was not coordinated within the Intelligence Community. It was produced under the auspices of the Deputy Director of CIA for Analysis.

Classified By: [redacted]
Derived From: CIA NSCG
Declassify On: 20501231

CIA-DA-CN-2025-20625

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departures from standard practices in the drafting, coordination, and reviewing of the ICA. These departures impeded efforts to apply rigorous tradecraft, particularly to the assessment's most contentious judgment.

(U) ***Timeline Impact***: The highly compressed timeline was atypical for a formal IC assessment, which ordinarily can take months to prepare, especially for assessments of such length, complexity, and political sensitivity. CIA's primary authors had less than a week to draft the assessment and less than two days to formally coordinate it with IC peers before it entered the formal review process at CIA on 20 December.

- (U) Multiple IC stakeholders said they felt "jammed" by the compressed timeline. Most got their first look at the hardcopy draft and underlying sensitive reporting just before or at the only in-person coordination meeting that was held on 19 December to conduct a line-by- line review.

- (~~S//NF~~) Following the coordination meeting, [redacted]

(U) Compressing review of the draft by multiple stakeholders to just a handful of days during a holiday week also created numerous challenges. This was further complicated by the need to conduct the review in hardcopy, with drafts having to be hand-carried between various IC offices and buildings. The pressing timeline and limitations of hardcopy review likely biased the overall review process to focus more on precision of language and sourcing rather than on more substantial, time-consuming edits to refine the overall presentation of the draft—which, with the benefit of hindsight, might have improved the argumentation in some areas.

- (~~S//NF~~) One of CIA's lead authors expressed surprise that the review process had resulted in so few changes, which was "unusual" for such a lengthy, complex, and high-profile assessment.

- (~~S//NF~~) The [redacted]

(U) Rushed Timeline Justified?

(U) ICD 203 stipulates that analysis be "independent of political consideration" and "must not be distorted by, nor shaped for, advocacy of a particular audience, agenda, or policy viewpoint." The election had concluded, and the ICA was essentially a post-mortem analysis. Therefore, the rushed timeline to publish both classified *and* unclassified versions before the presidential transition raised questions about a potential political motive behind the White House tasking and timeline.

- (U) Without a clear operational need for urgency, this accelerated process created vulnerabilities and opened lines of inquiry about potential bias.

- (U) A more measured approach with expanded time for review and wider input would have better adhered to standard intelligence tradecraft practices and potentially deflected questions about White House motivations.

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(U) ***Compartmentation Challenges***: Uneven access to highly compartmented information further complicated coordination and review and contributed to analytic differences on the ICA's most contentious point. The product spanned multiple CIA [redacted] compartments, and included restricted access FBI information, with some reporting touching on US Persons. Multiple ICA participants had access to intelligence that others did not. This restricted authors' ability to collaborate with a large pool of colleagues.

- (~~S//NF~~) Central to the judgment that Putin "aspired" to help Trump win was one highly classified CIA report. Brennan had tightly restricted access to this information within CIA; it had been collected in July but not disseminated in CIA serialized reporting until the week of 19 December.

- (~~S//NF~~) The CIA drafters had enjoyed privileged access to this information through participation in a highly compartmented analytic effort known as the "Fusion Cell"—which Brennan had created in July to focus on the IC's growing concern about Russian election interference. However, most ICA contributors, coordinators, and reviewers were only "read-in" to the sensitive reporting at the 19 December coordination meeting.

- (~~S//NF~~) One CIA manager stated that uneven access to compartmented information among ICA coordinators and reviewers contributed to an already "chaotic" process. He said some key analysts and managers were not cleared to review the ICA's most controversial aspects, and were only able to see portions of the draft out of context.

(U) Broader access to reporting—both prior to and throughout the preparation of the ICA—almost certainly would have led to more robust analytic debate. Even within the small circle of collaborators cleared for the most sensitive information, the judgment that Putin "aspired" to help Trump win prompted healthy and protracted debate. Including more voices with more time to weigh in undoubtedly would have refined, challenged, or surfaced analytic differences on that question or on other aspects of the ICA.

- (~~S//NF~~) A [redacted] report in 2017 indicated that the highest classified version of the ICA had been shared with more than 200 US officials. This is unusually high for such a highly compartmented product and calls into question whether the extreme limitations on access to underlying intelligence within the IC during the ICA's preparation was justifiable.

(~~S//NF~~) ***Agency Head Involvement***: While agency heads sometimes review controversial analytic assessments before publication, their direct engagement in the ICA's development was highly unusual in both scope and intensity. This exceptional level of senior involvement likely influenced participants, altered normal review processes, and ultimately compromised analytic rigor. One CIA analytic manager involved in the process said other analytic managers—who would typically have been part of the review chain opted out due to the politically charged environment and the atypical prominence of agency leadership in the process.

- (U) From the outset, agency heads chose to marginalize the National Intelligence Council (NIC), departing significantly from standard procedures for formal IC assessments. Typically, the NIC maintains control over drafting assignments, coordination, and review processes. In his book *Undaunted*, Brennan reveals that he established crucial elements of the process with the White House before NIC involvement, stating he informed them that CIA would "take the lead drafting the report"

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and that coordination would be limited to "ODNI, CIA, FBI, and NSA."

- (U) These departures from standard procedure not only limited opportunities for coordination and thorough tradecraft review, but also resulted in the complete exclusion of key intelligence agencies from the process. While sensitive counterintelligence information in community assessments often requires restricted access, the decision to entirely shut out the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research from any participation in such a high-profile assessment about an adversary's plans and intentions was a significant deviation from typical IC practices.

(U) It also was markedly unconventional to have Agency heads review and sign off on a draft before it was submitted to the NIC for review. The NIC did not receive or even see the final draft until just hours before the ICA was due to be published.

- (~~S//NF~~) In an email exchange on 20 December, then-DDCIA David Cohen informe[redacted] According to Cohen, [redacted]

- (~~S//NF~~) Brennan downplayed the concern, responding to Cohen that the "big three" referring to CIA, FBI, and NSA—"have every right to agree on language that will be included verbatim in the final version of the paper." Acknowledging that the NIC would still have a "right to differ," he stated, "I very much hope
that doesn't happen."

(U) Prejudicial Workforce Message

(~~S//NF~~) One business day before IC analysts convened for the only coordination session on the ICA, Brennan sent a note to the CIA workforce stating he had met with the DNI and FBI Director and that "there is strong consensus among us on the scope, nature, and intent of Russian interference in our recent Presidential election." While officers involved in drafting the ICA consistently said they did not feel pressured to reach specific conclusions, Brennan's premature signaling that agency heads had already reached consensus before the ICA was even coordinated risked stifling analytic debate.

(~~S//NF~~) The decision by agency heads to include the Steele Dossier in the ICA ran counter to fundamental tradecraft principles and ultimately undermined the credibility of a key judgment. The ICA authors first learned of the Dossier, and FBI leadership's insistence on its inclusion, on 20 December—the same day the largely coordinated draft was entering the review process at CIA. FBI leadership made it clear that their participation in the ICA hinged on the Dossier's inclusion and, over the next few days, repeatedly pushed to weave references to it throughout the main body of the ICA.

- (~~S//NF~~) The ICA authors and multiple senior CIA managers—including the two senior leaders of the CIA mission center responsible for Russia strongly opposed including the Dossier, asserting that it did not meet even the most basic tradecraft standards. CIA's Deputy Director for Analysis (DDA) warned in an email to Brennan on 29 December that including it in

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any form risked "the credibility of the entire paper."

- (~~S//NF~~) Despite these objections, Brennan showed a preference for narrative consistency over analytical soundness. When confronted with specific flaws in the Dossier by the two mission center leaders—one with extensive operational experience and the other with a strong analytic background—he appeared more swayed by the Dossier's general conformity with existing theories than by legitimate tradecraft concerns. Brennan ultimately formalized his position in writing, stating that "my bottomline is that I believe that the information warrants inclusion in the report."

- (~~S//NF~~) Ultimately, agency heads decided to include a two-page summary of the Dossier as an annex to the ICA, with a disclaimer that the material was not used "to reach the analytic conclusions." However, by placing a reference to the annex material in the main body of the ICA as the fourth supporting bullet for the judgment that Putin "aspired" to help Trump win, the ICA implicitly elevated unsubstantiated claims to the status of credible supporting evidence, compromising the analytical integrity of the judgment.

(U) Tradecraft Concerns

(U) The procedural anomalies that characterized the ICA's development had a direct impact on the tradecraft applied to its most contentious finding. With analysts operating under severe time constraints, limited information sharing, and heightened senior-level scrutiny, several aspects of tradecraft rigor were compromised particularly in supporting the judgment that Putin "aspired" to help Trump win.

(U) Strong Tradecraft Examples

(U) Even with the benefit of hindsight, the DA Review found much of the ICA's tradecraft to be robust and consistent with *Intelligence Community Directive (ICD) 203, "Analytic Standards,"* the primary guiding document for evaluation of analytic products for the IC. The assessment's analytic rigor was evident in its extensive sourcing: 173 separate reports from CIA, NSA, and FBI, supplemented by 74 citations from open sources.

- (U) The ICA also demonstrated strong adherence to tradecraft standards through frequent use of attributive language, explicit identification of intelligence gaps, and clear statements of confidence levels. This level of analytic rigor exceeded that of most IC assessments.

- (U) While the DA Review identified specific procedural and tradecraft issues with the one judgment, these issues should not be interpreted as indicative of broader systemic problems in the IC's analytic processes or standards.

- (U) The DA Review identified multiple specific concerns, including: a higher confidence level than was justified; insufficient exploration of alternative scenarios; lack of transparency on source uncertainty; uneven argumentation; and the inclusion of unsubstantiated Steele Dossier material.

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(~~S//NF~~) ***Confidence Levels*:** The "aspired" judgment did not merit the "high confidence" level that CIA and FBI attached to it. As explained in the ICA's *Annex H – Estimative Language*, "high confidence generally indicates that judgments are based on high-quality information from multiple sources." The ICA emphasized only the one highly classified CIA serialized report to support this judgment.

- (~~S//NF~~) In the ICA's first draft that was reviewed at the 19 December meeting, the authors had included the "aspired" judgment in a broader finding on all three assessed goals of the Russian influence campaign. With respect to the first two goals—undermining public faith in the US democratic process and denigrating Secretary Clinton to harm her potential presidency—the finding was underpinned by multiple high-quality sources. All meeting participants were comfortable with attaching "high confidence" to these two goals.

- (~~S//NF~~) However, NSA and a few other participants were not comfortable with ascribing "high confidence" to the "aspired" judgment. They cited the limited source base, lack of corroborating intelligence, and "the possibility for an alternative judgment" as driving their discomfort.

- (~~S//NF~~) As a result, the authors agreed to separate out the "aspired" judgment, and NSA eventually settled on ascribing it a "moderate confidence" level—which the DA Review found more consistent with ICD 203 standards. As explained in *Annex H*, "moderate confidence generally means that the information is credibly sourced and plausible but not . . . corroborated sufficiently."

(~~S//NF~~) ***Alternative Analysis*:** The ICA did not highlight outlier reporting or present alternative scenarios. Although [redacted], no alternative scenarios were identified or explored in the ICA—due in part to the highly compressed timeline. When asked how additional time would have affected the quality of the ICA, the [redacted]

- (~~S//NF~~) In one instance, the authors cited part of a credibly sourced report that supported the "high confidence" assessment on the first two goals of the Putin-directed campaign undermining the US democratic process and denigrating Clinton—but omitted information that conflicted with the "aspired" judgment. The omitted information, as well as a small body of other credibly sourced reporting that also was not cited in the ICA, suggested Putin was more ambivalent about which candidate won the election.

- (U) The ICA would have benefitted from including this reporting. Doing so would have shown that analysts were aware of it and that they had considered multiple scenarios. Even if analysts ultimately concluded the larger body of reporting was more compelling, analysts could have strengthened their argument by showing their analytic homework more methodically.

(~~S//NF~~) ***Source Transparency*:** The DA Review does not dispute the quality and credibility of the highly classified CIA serialized report that the ICA authors relied on to drive the "aspired" judgment. Consistent with ICD 203 standards, the *Scope and Sourcing* note attached to the ICA's highest classified version provided a holistic assessment of the strengths and weaknesses in the paper's overall source base and explained which sources were most important to the paper's key analytic judgments.

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- (~~S//NF~~) However, given the centrality of this singular report to the "aspired" judgment, the authors probably should have more clearly addressed the uncertainty with how the cited information on Putin's intentions was acquired.

- (~~S//NF~~) The placement of a key clause in the serialized report also left room for differing interpretations, adding another element of ambiguity. Referring to the clause, a senior CIA operations officer observed, "We don't know what was meant by that" and "five people read it five ways."

- (~~S//NF~~) The DA Review examined the underlying raw intelligence and confirmed that the clause was accurately represented in the serialized report, and that the ICA authors' interpretation of its meaning was most consistent with the raw intelligence.

(~~S//NF~~) ***Argumentation*:** In intelligence analysis, presenting a judgment effectively and logically requires clarity, structure, and a robust foundation of evidence and reasoning. Without the highly classified CIA report, the "aspired" judgment essentially rested on an assessment of the public behavior of senior Russian officials and state-controlled media, and on logic. Most analysts judged that denigrating Clinton equaled supporting Trump; they reasoned that in a two-person race the tradeoff was zero-sum. This logic train was plausible and sensible, but was an inference rather than fact sourced to multiple reporting streams.

- (~~S//NF~~) Once the "aspire" judgment was separated from the other two findings on Putin's intentions, it struggled to stand on its own. As noted earlier, the subsequent decision to bolster this judgment by referencing the unsubstantiated Steele Dossier material only further weakened its analytic foundation. This raised the question of whether the "aspire" judgment was even needed, as its inclusion risked distracting readers from the more well-documented findings on Putin's strategic objectives.

- (U) The risks of including weakly supported judgments are well known to analysts, who are trained that readers—especially skeptical ones—may reject an entire analysis if a single judgment appears exaggerated, biased, or unsupported. This is particularly true in high- stakes contexts like election interference, where political sensitivities amplify scrutiny and where poorly supported judgments can muddle the overall narrative.

- (~~S//NF~~) The two senior leaders of the CIA mission center responsible for Russia argued jointly against including the "aspire" judgment. In an email to Brennan on 30 December, they stated the judgment should be removed because it was both weakly supported and unnecessary, given the strength and logic of the paper's other findings on intent. They warned that including it would only "open up a line of very politicized inquiry."

(U) Lessons Learned

(U) The review of the 2016 ICA revealed how departures from established processes and tradecraft standards can affect even fundamentally sound analysis. While the overall assessment was deemed defensible, the identified procedural anomalies and tradecraft issues highlight critical lessons for handling controversial or politically charged topics. Adhering to established analytic processes and rigorous tradecraft is essential to ensure credibility, objectivity, and accuracy—particularly when time pressures, sensitive information, and high-level attention create risks of compromising standard practices.

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- (U) ***Timeline Impact:*** Rapid assessments often are necessary, but sacrificing analytic rigor and tradecraft standards for speed can lead to long- term credibility issues. Sufficient time should be provided for thorough coordination, review, and debate of analytic judgments.

- (U) ***Compartmentation Challenges:*** Uneven access to compartmented information can lead to conflicting assessments and hinder effective collaboration. When possible, ensuring all key stakeholders have access to the same information base enhances analytic rigor.

- (U) ***Agency Head Involvement:*** Excessive involvement of agency heads in the analytic process can intimidate analysts and undermine analytic integrity. A more independent and transparent process allows for freer debate and consideration of alternatives.

- (U) ***Confidence Levels:*** High confidence judgments should only be made when supported by multiple high-quality sources. Single-source judgments, even from credible sources, warrant lower confidence levels.

- (U) ***Alternative Analysis:*** Exploring and presenting alternative scenarios or conflicting information strengthens the overall analysis. This demonstrates thorough consideration of all possibilities and potential biases.

- (U) ***Source Transparency***: Analysts should have access to the details they need to understand the limitations and uncertainties regarding sourcing. When relying heavily on a single source, analysts should clearly address such ambiguity to maintain credibility.

- (U) ***Argumentation:*** Weak or poorly supported judgments can undermine the credibility of an entire assessment, especially on politically sensitive topics. Analysts should carefully

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consider whether including such judgments adds value.

(U) The DA routinely conducts internal after-action reviews (AAR) of its work on controversial and high-profile intelligence topics. Such AARs are crucial tools for improving DA analytic processes and tradecraft, and are often used as case studies to support foundational training at the DA's Sherman Kent School (SKS).

- (U) No such AAR was conducted in the immediate wake of the ICA's publication because it was considered too politically sensitive, according to DA officers involved in the process at the time.

- (U) The DA will incorporate this AAR and lessons learned into its SKS curriculum.

(U) CIA also will apply these lessons learned to continue to drive improvements to its standard operating procedures for assessing foreign interference in US elections, providing greater transparency and rigor. CIA took multiple steps leading up to the 2024 presidential election to minimize or avoid the sorts of problems analysts faced in 2016. This included:

- (U) Communicating clear expectations and guidelines for conceptualizing, coordinating, and reviewing election security products, and for disseminating them to a standardized list of policymakers.

- (U) Ensuring consistent access for designated analysts across the IC to highly compartmented election-related intelligence and products.

- (U) Establishing appropriate parameters and clear protocols for the role of the DCIA and DDCIA in the production of election-related assessments.

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